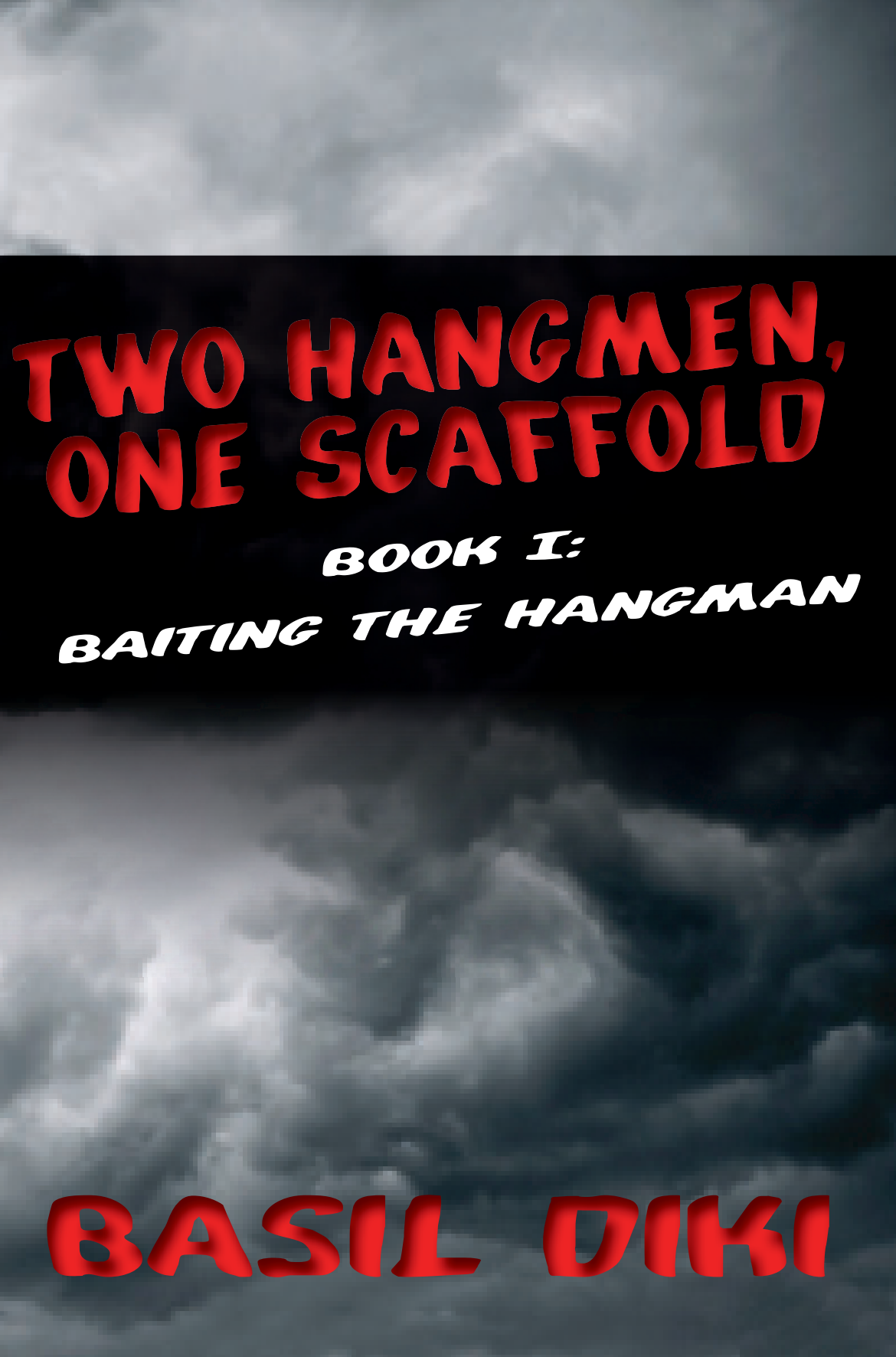




TWO HANGMEN, ONE SCAFFOLD

**BOOK I:
BAITING THE HANGMAN**

BASIL DIKI

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

Two Hangmen, One Scaffold

Baiting the Hangman

Book I

Basil Diki



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Foreword

Although fictionalised, actual events inspired *Two Hangmen, One Scaffold*; therefore the storyline, the major characters and a majority of the elaborate incidents and locations in the story are factual. In pursuance of an editorial recommendation, I had to split the tale into two, *Baiting the Hangman* and *In the Hangman's Shadow*, for technical conformity; otherwise, the two books are components of one story though both are technically readable on their own.

The Johannes Masowe Apostolic Sect, founded in 1932, is a flourishing faith in Zimbabwe and many southern African countries. The sect's songs and prayers in this story are verbatim and their bracketed English versions transliterate. The Great Dance, *Gule Wamkulu*, or *Nyanu*, is a feared Malawian secret cult practice too mystic for outsiders to understand ordinarily. Aspects of this cult herein are without bias or favour, and gleaned from practitioners and witnesses who chose anonymity.

I wish to salute my wife, Joleen, for her patience, support and endurance of a writer's solitude. I am indebted to Kumbirai Murisa Kundiona who went through the initial draft of this tale in its crudest form, and spurred me on with her encouragement. I am also grateful to a number of people I interviewed. My thanks are equally due to some illegal gold diggers who ventured several fathoms in defunct gold mines to sustain themselves, and volunteered to me accounts of their experiences on and inside the earth's crust. The interviewees elected to remain anonymous.

Although Empress, Venice and Patchway mines were indeed on the goldfield mentioned, and at the time of writing operational, closed and semi-defunct respectively, the accounted circumstances of these concerns, though fictionalised, are as honest as humanly possible.

Notwithstanding the tale's roots in facts, I deliberately peopled the tale with maverick characters. Should this story elevate or offend any person(s) in any manner, religious, political or otherwise, such offence or elevation is outside my storytelling intentions.

Basil Diki
Harare

Prologue

For members of an impoverished mining and farming community, New Year's Eve was a time to bury a terrible year and learn what the coming year offered. The Johannes Masowe shrine, an open acreage on a gentle hillside slope, was the place for everyone wishing to know what the coming year had in store. Because most of the sect's members and non-believers alike had turned out, the shrine was packed.

The shrine proper, the area around Archangel Gabriel's arena, where the Man of God, Prophet Jatropa, paced the length of a bonfire of logs and tree trunks, was heavenly by the appearance of the faithful. Throngs in white flowing garments and shawls sat on both sides of the fire. The women sat cross-legged on the western side while men sat with their legs spread out before them on the eastern side. On the periphery, with some people sitting well in the bushes, among boulders and shrubs surrounding the shrine, were the Christians and ordinary people from the surrounding farmlands and gold claims. Everyone, including the prophet, was barefoot.

Naturally, at this time of the year, more so after the prophecies, many people converted to the sect, denouncing their surnames and totems, except their first names. In lieu of their surnames and totemic salutations, every believer in an unmitigated manner adopted *Johannes* as their second name and lost whatever title he had. The title *Madzibaba* prefaced every first name. Loosely translated, the salutation meant *Reverent Sir*. Women became *Madzimai*, Reverent Madam.

Sleek cars, mostly Japanese all-terrain luxury vehicles, were parked in a cleared area at the foot of the hill, the portion designated for the profane things of this world; cars, money, shoes and sandals, umbrellas, jewellery, cellular phones, purses and bags... anything other than the sect's stipulated white garments. People left all their items

unattended and believed the Archangel Michael stood guard over them.

The occasion attracted cabinet ministers, high-ranking army officials, some heads of government departments, and captains of industry. Members of the feared Central Intelligence Organisation (C.I.O), suspicious by profession, mingled with the faithful. They came to spy and abduct the prophet should he utter subversive statements.

The faithful sang with resignation, a show of their unwavering allegiance to the prophet and the spirit of Baba Johannes. A woman with a mournful girlish voice led the singing, the chorus blending with her words at fever pitch:

Baba, munoziva kwati-cha-enda!

Chorus: *Tindzeiwo, Ndimi munoziva kwatichaenda!*

Tindzeiwo!

(Father, You know our destiny!

Chorus: Tell us, You who knows our destiny!

Reveal it to us!)

At twelve midnight, when cocks were crowing in distant compounds around the shrine, the prophet stretched his hands, silencing the singing, and immediately went into a cataract of tongues perceptibly Aramaic, the words vituperative and cracking from his mouth. The bonfire didn't only illuminate his white garments, but also gave him an outlandish appearance as shadows danced on his towering figure when he turned or gestured. With a matching two-metre shawl draped on his right shoulder, which he kept adjusting, he appeared overdressed. He was a very tall, skeletal man, evidently a man who had tortured his body with relentless fasting. When the tirade of tongues ended, the prophet was sweating profusely.

Everyone sat up anxiously, within them duets of fear and joyous

expectation raging. To some the prophet would deliver devastating prophecies of illness, miscarriage, expulsion from work or pending death. To others he would deliver predictions of good health, looming weddings and prosperity. Of the hundreds gathered, some would receive prophecies and some would not.

“Peace!” Prophet Jatropha’s voice was sermonic.

“Amen!” the multitude responded in unison.

“If a man’s thoughts are free from sin and distraction,” he shouted, his voice both melodramatic and sangfroid, “if he apprehends Baba Johannes and God in an acceptable manner and rejoices in what he apprehends, no evil can afflict that man whatsoever! May the Word of God be your refuge!”

“Amen!” the gathering roared.

“But if a man’s thoughts are marinated in sin and his eyes and hands seek feminine curves and earthly riches, God’ll hide His face from him! He shall fall prey to the devourer! Many evils and troubles shall befall him in the coming year! To you who believe and are steadfast in their trust in God, your reward lies in believing without seeing. May the peace of the Lord abide in all of you!”

“Amen!”

He began prophesying to the sect’s twelve elders sitting in a row immediately before the fire. One after the other he pointed at the elders. When an elder’s turn came, the man knelt, arms folded or hands clasped. The Man of God told them about the ailments they’d suffer in the course of the year, births and deaths in store for their families, and many other things that usually devastated the hearer. To some he prescribed regular prayers, to others he picked pebbles where he stood and consecrated them into charms they’d carry wherever they went to avert disaster in their lives. After every ten minutes or so singers spontaneously relieved the prophet with lengthy songs, whereupon the Man of God uttered tongues on top of his voice until the singing died.

The session went on like that, singing interrupting prophecy, until

about three o'clock when the prophet turned to national topics. He said the country would continue to hold scheduled elections and allayed fears of war. When he reminded the gathering of the political violence that saw gangs of arsonists, rapists and murderers gut urban houses and rural homesteads with fire, abuse women, and maim or kill unfortunate people in past elections, total silence fell on the shrine.

Afterwards, he told the crowd, "Before the year ends, a man who lives in a nearby mine compound, a Mr Emedhi, by occupation an office orderly, will split heads open with an axe."

A fearful and flabbergasted murmur ran through the gathering.

"Untold evil awaits this man," the prophet continued. He turned to the row of elders. "Look for him at Sakis Mine! When you find him, coerce him into being baptised seven times. It would be better if he were baptised in the River Jordan, the Nile or Euphrates. May God give His angels charge over this man!"

"Amen!" the gathering thundered, many people craning to see the prophet.

Prophet Jatropha wished them peace repeatedly, and the crowd's responsive thundering was nine-fold. He stood still, head inclined at an angle, hands clasped, like one listening intently in the humblest manner possible. Then he began to nod, intermittently bursting. "Yes, my Lord...I behold the holy *Merkavah*...Yes, Rabbi... I hear you, Gabriel...Yes, Messiah... I'm here, Metatron...Sandalphon, my lord!"

Everyone sat still in awe.

"You're poor in spirit and worldly riches," the Man of God went on with a tone of accusation and mockery. "All your lives you've petitioned God for nothing but bread and school fees for your children. Because you ignorantly belittle the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who gave innumerable wealth to Solomon, the very God who gave you dominion over everything, it'll suffice to take Emedhi to any nearest river. After a sevenfold immersion, christen him Aaron! Pray the Lord delivers this man from the snare of the

fowler!”

“Amen!”

“A tumultuous wind is gathering in the east!” He paused. “Beware, a demon in human form shall come to this area and pitch a tent in our midst! His tentacles and tendrils are long and seductive! The plumage of the raven is his clothing! Pray that neither his tentacles nor tendrils touch anyone of you! At the appointed time I shall shade more light to relevant individuals with regards to this prophecy!” He looked about for a while, shaking his head, before shouting, “May the peace of the Lord help your unbelief!”

“Amen!”

He went round the fire and stared at the womenfolk, seemingly scanning. After a while, he pointed at a woman in white robes. She knelt on the ground, her hands clasped in humility.

“*Madzimai*, tell your husband at God’s appointed time he’ll pick digging tools and dig. Go and say to his face, ‘The prophet says when you dig, dig, dig, and dig!’ *Madzimai*, wealth awaits you and your husband underground! If you can turn him from his wickedness, he’ll find the wealth sooner than later! Make God’s bosom your habitation!”

“Amen!” the multitude rambled.

“Too many people spend money they haven’t earned, to buy things they don’t want, to impress people they don’t like.”

-**Will Smith b. 1968** (USA Actor, singer and film producer)

Chapter 1

With Christmas approaching, Binga Jochoma alias Akar Muja saw nothing but glaring desperation in his life and became at loggerheads within. Since the beginning of the year, the feelings of disaster and more poverty were closing in on him. These feelings brought sweat beads on his forehead and a sensation of alligator pepper in his stomach. He could easily pinpoint the source of the hunch—the prophecy delivered at New Year’s Eve. Now it was 16 November.

While neither devil nor calamity had visited him and his family, the festive season loomed dangerously for him. It was always so when he was penniless, which roused murderous thoughts within him.

What other demon in human form would come to Sakis Mine? He had thought since January. Who’d meet the definition better than I?

On learning about the prophecy from his wife on 1 January, he concluded it would’ve made sense had Jatropa prophesied that a demon in human form dwelling in their midst would rear its head and cause mayhem.

The sun was setting in the east, its mandate for the day over. Soon, shift work at the Sakis gold mill would beckon. Looking outside through the door at the darkening day, Binga sniffed a metaphor in the whole enterprise. Everything was duty-bound. Day was duty-bound to give way to night. The sun rose and set religiously. Women conceived and gave birth. Men lived and died. Apart from indiscernible tears, the majority left no legacy, no mark, as if they had lived as shadows. He was far from a shadow.

He thought of his capabilities, all military, and his obligation as a husband and a father. Definitely, it wasn’t crying foul everyday over the effects of American and European Union sanctions on a continuously shrinking national economy. He was a pragmatic man

who had long ceased to cry and curse politicians for their errors. Survival in Zimbabwe had long been a challenge, especially after the inaugural land invasions of 2000. He chose to see himself as a buoyant leaf on tumultuous waters. A hippopotamus found passage where there was none sensibly, which was what the scenario demanded, to learn from nature.

As he sat alone in the lounge-cum-kitchen, he decided to be realistic. Foremost he couldn't stand to see his family scrounging. Pennilessness straitjacketed a man into painful humility. Poverty was the one thing anathema in his life. Stress-induced impotence crept inside him whenever he was broke. So far, the year had been nonplussed for him. Despite providing basics for his family, he hadn't accomplished anything meaningful though his customary wife remained proud of him.

Recalling the alleged prophecy on his prosperity delivered at the apostolic shrine eleven months earlier, which Matipa had urged him to believe, he cursed the idiocy of a false faith that poked the private lives of non-believers. He found the sect a scandal that vainly sought to coerce him into digging until he perished from over-exertion.

For the past ten and a half months, his customary wife, the believer, had tirelessly repeated the prophet's words to him verbatim: *"Madzimai, tell your husband at God's appointed time he'll pick digging tools and embark on digging. Go and say to his face, 'The prophet says when you dig, dig, dig, and dig!' Madzimai, wealth awaits you and your husband underground! If you can turn him from his wickedness, he'll find the wealth sooner than later!"*

The heavy thuds of an outdated gold mill two hundred metres from his residence interrupted his thoughts. Its steam engine-like rhythm and noise reminded him that he was a mill feeder earning one hundred and fifty US dollars a month. The wage hardly sustained him and his twenty-six year old wife, Matipa, let alone his six-year old son, Peza, notwithstanding the demands of Nomathemba, his legitimate wife. Nomathemba, a non-believer, was a schoolteacher. She lived in her chosen twofold darkness in the City of Bulawayo about three

hundred kilometres away. He saw her darkness as dual; she was a practical pagan and didn't know of his customary marriage to Matipa.

Nomathemba was a returnee from the United Kingdom. However, the ex-migrant worker was too libidinous for his tastes. If she learnt of his marriage to Matipa, the returnee could sue or have him arrested. Binga couldn't help thinking that abroad Nomathemba had probably supplemented her income through sexual decadence. In his imagination, he saw her renting beds in brothels in London's red light districts.

Of course, there was Gillian, his undergraduate girlfriend, a fountain of knowledge on the world's current affairs, a breeze that soothed his heart. Gillian was his sleeping and waking thought, often the antidote to his creeping impotence. When he was broke and impotent, the remedy was usually to imagine himself in bed with the undergraduate, an undefiled rosebud, when in reality he was with Matipa, the mother of his only son, or when he was with childless Nomathemba. Gillian was a pleasant puzzle he thought he wouldn't demystify completely. Endless mystery was a contrivance he pursued in a woman. An affair became something like an adventure or an African safari.

Despite his poverty and subsequent temporary impotency, Matipa and Nomathemba were now bland and too predictable to arouse him easily. The former imbibed biblical scriptures and was too religious for his liking. Every Thursday from 3 pm to the same time the following day, she refrained from taking all kinds of meat. During that period, she forbade him from touching or being intimate with her in keeping with the unwritten statutes of her apostolic faith. She called it observing *jesteni* before Friday's church service. He interpreted it as a wanton denial of his conjugal rights, a forcing of her religion down his throat. At times, he couldn't bear it and took her against her wish.

Because he was traditionally married to Matipa, he took it he *bought* her about seven years ago at a cost of thirty thousand

Zimbabwe dollars, everything from cattle to the groceries, refreshments and mandatory clothing for the relevant in-laws considered. Converted to hard currency, the amount wouldn't exceed two hundred and fifty US dollars. However, at a time when the economy was failing and food was scarce due to the mayhem of the rampant farm invasions resulting in dismal rapport with Britain, the amount had earned him respect from his in-laws and from Matipa herself.

Binga riveted his mind on Christmas. The day was drawing. He was a husband and a father, titles that came with responsibilities, and supposed the threesome dear to him expected him to shower them with gifts and money if he were to continue to be of significance in their lives. Rising from the sofa, he resolved to go AWOL. He crossed into the bedroom, an adjoining room. He had to leave the house before his wife returned from the compound's borehole. In times like these, he slipped out of the house for days and would return laden with groceries and enough money to draw ululation and totemic praise poetry from his wives.

As he changed clothes and picked the things he would require in the coming days, lack of tangible achievements since the beginning of the year weighed heavily on him. What was the significance of his employment when the wages were too paltry even for a childless bachelor? In Bulawayo, Harare or the resort town of Victoria Falls, people booked hotel suites for that amount, merely to squander in less than eight hours of sleep. Yet for an entire month, he performed backbreaking work to earn it.

No, he resolved. The Commando Regiment trained and programmed me to be extremely brutal, efficient and yet reap maximum results.

At thirty-three years old, he was still in his prime, mentally and physically, yet he was a mere mill feeder at Sakis Mine. Nobody knew his closely guided secret: he was an ex-commando, a toughened military man who used to represent an equivalent of two soldiers. None of the three women in his life knew exactly who he was. His

personal maxim was simple: *a secret disclosed to a wife ceased to be one upon revelation*. The management and staff at the mine had no idea of his background though he knew many people considered him dangerous. In a remote community like Sakis Mine, such a consideration was an attribute. It assured him of security; no one would dare challenge him.

Soon after, Binga walked eastwards out of the mine compound, his mind focused on his mission. Christmas wouldn't find him begging, or his nearest and dearest munching plain rice and wearing the same old clothes they had worn throughout the year. From his left came jubilant noises of a bunch of children playing soccer. Peza would be among them. He avoided looking in the direction afraid he might see the boy and postpone his mission out of affection for his son.

He crossed the Harare-Bulawayo railway line, took a footpath amid tall grasses and emerged at the intercity artery. Only then did he realise he was forgetting something of great importance. Retracing his footprints at a trot and keeping a wary eye for Matipa, he came to the compound again and took a footpath northwards. He moved round several huts of clay and mud, with a few here and there of sheet metal, until the compound was behind him. A lonely footpath took him through a veldt with sparse deciduous trees to the area's common graveyard, an unkempt miserable sod surrounded by patches of shrubby hedge.

He was glad it was getting darker. Darkness turned him into an indecipherable silhouette to anyone watching him from a distance. After making sure no one was about, he sneaked into the graveyard and made his way to a cairn under a tall tree. He squatted beside it and set down to work, quickly removing some stones from its side. A few minutes later, he sneaked out of the graveyard and made his way back to the highway, two items of paramount importance to his operations concealed on his person.

Traffic was meagre on the highway. He boarded a packed Gokwe-bound bus about an hour later when the sun had long vanished behind the western horizon.

Aboard he pondered his life and future. *If only I could be invisible*, he thought, *I could live like a celebrity in the United States of America or Europe, marrying, divorcing, and remarrying. Poverty makes men stick to lousy women.*

The women in his life locked in his mind. If they were comfortable with the idea, and tolerated each other, he could live with them under one roof, or place them individually in three different cities, Oslo, New York, Johannesburg, for instance. Far flung from each other like that, it would be impossible for the trio to claw or poison each other.

For many years now, he had kept a plan in his head that would cast him in a world of wealth. As a teenager, he had always fantasised about being a proud owner of an upmarket mansion on a mountainside. His preference was a renovated and modernised medieval castle in Scotland, or a chateau in France or Italy. He had also yearned for a summerhouse overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in Cape Town, South Africa.

On completing Ordinary Level and joining the Zimbabwe National Army as a private, he saw that he wouldn't live the luxurious life he dreamt of if he remained a soldier content with a meagre salary. Formal employment was unrewarding in a developing country under economic sanctions. The realisation came when he was a fully-fledged commando on a tour of duty in the forests of the once rebel-infested Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even if the government or any other organisation gainfully employed him, he couldn't see himself realising his dreams.

Only international celebrities, members of royal families and business moguls were proud owners of mansions and castles. Though he wasn't like them in any way, he was determined to achieve his dreams through juju.

Chapter 2

More than thirty minutes after returning from the compound borehole with water, Matipa couldn't understand her husband's disappearance as she fried chicken and cooked rice on a two-plate electric stove. She suspected the norm. He would return after a week or two weighed down with groceries, his pockets bursting with hard currency, and despite herself, she would ululate and dance.

Peza sat in a sofa behind her, watching the European Soccer League on television.

"Where's Daddy?" Peza suddenly asked. "Why does he always leave without saying goodbye to me?"

The innocence of the questions caught her by surprise. Stirring the chicken, she knew she had to lie. How could she tell him it boggled her why he always left unceremoniously?

"Something came up and he had to go away. He wanted to say bye-bye to you, but there was no time and you were out there playing soccer."

"You're lying, Mammy."

She froze. "What makes you think so, Peza?"

"Whenever you lie to me you don't look at me."

She forced a smile, turning around to look and point a mock reprimanding finger at him. "A *good* mother doesn't lie to her *good* son. A *good* son doesn't accuse his *good* mother of lying."

"When is Daddy coming back?"

She sighed and shrugged. "What I know is he always comes back." She maintained her stare at him afraid he would accuse her again.

"Do other fathers also go away and come back after several days?"

“Yes and no. Fathers are different. One day you’ll be a father and tell me if fathers behave that way. Which teams are playing?” She asked, turning to the pot on the cooker.

“Liverpool and Man U.” He was quiet for a few seconds. The soccer commentary issuing from the television filled the brief interlude. “Why does Daddy go to the cemetery?”

The question astounded her. She turned and looked at him again, but this time she was shaking her head in disapproval. “What’re you talking about, Peza?”

“People say he sneaks to the cemetery.”

“Who says?”

“People.”

“Don’t listen to the people of this compound. Failures hate us.”

“But so far three friends of mine told me Daddy goes alone to the cemetery.

“It cannot be your father. Who told them?”

“They said many people know it. What’s a weirdo, Mammy?”

“You ask too many questions.”

“People say Daddy is a weirdo.”

“A good boy doesn’t believe the bad things people say about his father. Which team are you supporting?”

“Liverpool. Is Daddy dangerous?”

“He’s a good man. Other men want to be like him in many ways.”

To her relief, he riveted his eyes on the television screen again, and she turned to her cooking. Like Peza, she had heard bad things about her husband, atrocious things.

She couldn’t disclose to him that his father’s name sent shock waves in every direction. Employees and their families at established mines like Venice, now defunct, and Empress, ten and twenty kilometres respectively to the west of Sakis Mine, were prey in Akar’s game reserve. People said he was a beast and alleged by his hand

many men had fallen, many women windowed. Such reports frequently reached Matipa's ears.

At first, she chose to disbelieve the rumours as something stemming from biased innuendo spewing from jealous people. How could she have believed them when her husband wasn't a violent man? He never resorted to raising his voice or violence to solve domestic disputes that infringed occasionally into their marriage of seven years. Akar was her soul mate. They got along fairly and he rarely lost his temper. However, the frequency of the reports changed her mind and her perception of him. He was dangerous to the society, but not to her and his son. She once saw stains and dried blotches of blood on his clothes he couldn't explain. However, it was his custom to return with his pockets lined with sizeable amounts of American banknotes and nuggets of gold, which overshadowed her negative perception of him.

Owing to his unceremonious departures, the family lived in relative comfort by local standards. The inhabitants of the mine compound were envious of his capabilities. Akar himself dismissed reports of his savagery as allegations coming from his never-do-well detractors too languid to toil beneficially for their families. The stains and blotches, he would say, were from the buffalos and kudus he poached for meat in distant game reserves, meat he allegedly sold to villagers in remote rural districts, to supplement his meagre income at Sakis Mine.

For going out of his way to provide for his family, she was profoundly proud of him. She found relief from the slight chance he could indeed be a poacher, and chose to take the reports as hogwash lies. If ever Akar were terrible, she would lay the blame squarely on God though she didn't want to believe the Almighty had given her a murderer for a husband.

It baffled Matipa that his record at the mine, discounting the habitual absenteeism, was almost perfect except for one incident two years ago when an old lasher, Mr Rungano, came running to their

house to fetch her. Breathless, Mr Rungano said her husband was in a murderous rage over poor working conditions. The lasher added Akar was wielding a small metal axe, something like a tomahawk he drew from the trousers of his work-suit. The mill manager sought her assistance in calming him down because the manner he pranced and bellowed his grievances, the axe firmly held in his hand, was frightening everybody and had halted milling. It could be true, she realised; a while ago, the thunderous thuds of the three-stamp gold mill had fallen silent. Even those who sympathised with him and endured the same working conditions and remuneration had fled from the mill, Mr Rungano had said, the closest he came to hinting her Akar was set to axe the mill manager.

Doubtful her husband was capable of such actions; she put on a pair of shoes and rushed towards the mill site. In his mid-fifties, Mr Rungano strained to run ahead of her in his gumboots, another hint that indeed there was an emergency at the mill requiring her intervention. Again, as she ran behind him, she couldn't accept that Akar had drawn a small metal axe from his trousers; he never carried any weapons on his person.

When the two were set to clear from the thicket of thorny bushes and dense trees between the compound and the mill, they heard the initial squeaking of the mill that characterised its coming into life. The noise was a distinct continuous quake. It came from the wide belt that drove the gigantic wooden flywheel that turned the rotors, which in turn sequentially raised the tappets attached to the mid-sections of three eight-metre tall steel stamps that raised the forty-kilogram shoes in the cast-iron mortar. In the mortar, commonly referred to as the gold box, shoes and three dies mounted in the chamber crushed ore to powder between them. The cumbersome machine was old, pioneer-column time technology, but it gave results.

When the mill growled into life, Matipa sighed with relief and slowed down to catch her breath. She didn't do physical exercises and

opportunities to run rarely presented themselves. A homemaker had to be reserved and unhurried in all her actions, which was the proper definition for decency befitting a norm-embellished married African woman of impeccable manners. Mr Rungano didn't slow down or look over his shoulder.

Upon arriving into the clearing, which was the mill site, they found the mesmerising ore grinder at full swing and thundering as if it had been running all along. Akar, shirtless, shovelled ore into the ever-hungry metal devil, his back to them. A youthful lasher, the one who had remained when the old man ran to fetch Matipa, was pushing an ore-laden wheelbarrow onto the receiving bay on which Akar stood feeding fragmented greenstone rock into the chute of the mill. Panting, Mr Rungano stopped, turned and looked at her.

When she caught up with him at a steady trot, she looked at her toiling husband and then questioningly at the old lasher. He shrugged and gestured bafflement at the turn of events. In the distance, Mr Gilchrist Keneas, the coloured mill manager, was walking towards the office wiping sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. Everything was as normal as ever. By use of gestures owing to the ear-splitting thuds from the mill and the noisy whirr of its fifteen-horsepower electric motor, Matipa demanded to know why Mr Rungano had unnecessarily caused such alarm and disturbed her peace.

She couldn't inquire from her husband afraid she would interfere with his duties, and there was a chance he wouldn't take the interference kindly. Her place as a homemaker was in their two-roomed house. Akar made it clear that the mill and the offices were off-limits to her. Matipa, like many wives in the mining compounds, had understood the concerns of her husband. He didn't want his wife to see him toiling and taking instructions from his superiors.

Mr Rungano shook his head and looked at Akar less than thirty metres away. Something caught his eye. Nodding his head like one who had just made a discovery of paramount importance, he raised a hand and pointed a finger slightly to the left of Akar, bringing her

focus to one of the two thick wooden kingposts vertically supporting the mill structure.

In the post, level with Akar's left shoulder when he stood erect in the throes of shovelling, hung a small metal axe with a red and blue beadwork at the end of its handle, and a thin strip of a mediumistic cloth dominantly red with decorations of black and white dots and sergeant-like arrows. The beadwork and the cloth were always associated with spirits and mediums. The blade of the weird weapon was semi-embedded in the wooden post. She held her agape mouth in shock, turned and wordlessly returned to their dwelling. Her wish that the bad things said about her husband were mere rumour was misplaced. The axe stuck in the post confirmed her fears.

At the end of his shift, he came home, smiling and jovial as ever. That evening, as they lay in bed in the dark awaiting sleep, she held his hand and asked him. "Is everything fine at the mill?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Did the day pass without incident?"

He laughed coyly. "I guess some rumourmonger told you something."

"Tell your wife."

"There was a minor misunderstanding between me and the mill manager, which is normal at every workplace from the North to the South Pole in any direction." In justifying the dispute, he mysteriously talked about the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway line, the UK-France Channel Tunnel, the Trans-Atlantic optic fibre electronically bridging America and Europe, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and, closer to home, the Beira Corridor Pipeline. When he said monetary and technical disagreements dogged the projects from their conception to their commissioning, she understood him a little. Then he prattled about the Vatican City, the Great Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China and the city of Tokyo, emphasising they were monumental projects whose construction was undoubtedly fraught with disputes and disagreements for their benefit. He argued

that gold milling at Sakis was a medium-scale project, which attracted equally average disputes and misunderstandings.

He was studious and better read than she was. His library was in three sacks in the bedroom. It had atlases, old copies of the *Readers' Digest*, South African fashion and gossip magazines and an assortment of novels by obscure American, European and Russian authors. A few books and newspaper cuttings were on matadors, *banderilleros* and picadors, his passion. He bought the dog-eared books from vendors on pavements in Kadoma. The cuttings were from the *Herald*, the *Sunday Times* of South Africa and other international papers and magazines.

She had wanted to ask about the weird axe, but the question would betray her unsanctioned visit to a mill he deemed out of bounds to her. The need to maintain peace in the household outweighed a combination of her worry and curiosity. However, in the middle of the night when he was fast asleep, she woke up, switched on the light and thoroughly went through his clothes for the axe, as if it was a small thing he could've hidden in pockets or seams. The search was in vain.

The following morning, when Akar had gone to work, a wife to the youthful lasher at the gold mill paid her a visit. Taking advantage of their attendance to the same apostolic sect and shrine, she stood framed in the doorway and said, "Your life's in danger. You're married to a beast."

"Blessed are the peacemakers, *Madzimai* Tryfin."

"Please don't find offence, *Madzimai*. My husband told me your husband charged at the manager yesterday."

"Cursed is anyone who destroys a marriage."

"Believe me. He drew a small beaded metal axe from the trousers of his work suit. When he was a few paces from Mr Keneas, he hurled the axe, missing his forehead by inches."

"The blade sank into a kingpost," Matipa had added.

"You saw it, *Madzimai*?"

“He’s my husband. He tells me everything.”

The gossipier frowned. “Your husband had the audacity to attack Caesar’s Herod Antipas.”

“Herod was thoughtless enough to kill John the Baptist. If you had my husband’s eyes, you’d see Keneas otherwise.”

“The mill manager must be held in equal awe and respect to Caesar himself, Mr Artaxerxes Korykos. Upon the Greek’s kindness and courtesy our husbands work here and we live in the compound without paying any levies or charges.”

Matipa stared at her expressionless. Within, she was vexed.

“Either fast for your husband’s deliverance or leave him.”

Matipa found the latter a demonic suggestion. “Though I must remain meek and sheepish in reverence of God, I order you out of my sight.”

“What advice can scum like me give you?” *Madzimai* Tryfin shook her head and left.

She loved Akar and couldn’t imagine life without him. He was the best thing that ever happened to her. Homely and biddable, he was the best husband in the world and he was the one who had broken her virginity. Imagining herself in the arms of any other man soured her senses. If something were to happen to him, she wouldn’t marry again. Remarrying would be akin to prostituting and betraying her love for Akar, dead or alive.

Often she prayed God wouldn’t allow death to visit them singularly. She would reverie about dying together with her husband and lying in one double grave, side by side, and if permissible, in one coffin. Before the disturbance for improved working conditions, they had been married for five years of peace, negligible romance and abundance in the things they craved. Even if ruthless opportunity were to present itself, she wouldn’t consider marrying the richest men in the world.

About Mr Rungano, he died a year later, at the foot of the gold mill. The flywheel came loose when he was standing at the mill as he

pasted a makeshift cigar with his spittle. The unwieldy component crushed him to pulp. Sympathizers buried him in the compound's graveyard. Because he was childless and had no known relatives, no one came forward to claim his compensation.

"Mammy," it was Peza again, "is it okay for a bad person to kill bad people?"

Surely, Peza had heard evil things about his father. "Your father is a good man." Again, she couldn't look at her son.

"You told me. But what does the Bible say about a bad man who kills other bad men?"

She set the stirrer on the cooker and crossed to him, wishing she had the knowhow to counsel her son. She knelt beside the sofa, her hands on the armrest. "Daddy isn't like other fathers who watch their families starving. He does extra jobs so that you and I lack nothing. How many children in the compound have soccer balls?"

"Are there jobs in the cemetery? I don't want him to go to the cemetery. My friends laugh at me."

She held his hand reassuringly. "I've already told you Daddy is a good man. Next year when you go to school, you'll start to learn new things about life. By the time you leave school, you'll look back and be proud of Daddy."

"When I grow up I'll say good bye to my child and wife before I travel."

"That would be wonderful. You'll be a marvellous daddy."

He smiled, but spirited commentary from the television set, the prelude to a goal, re-diverted his attention to the screen. A Manchester United defender fouled a Liverpool striker near the goalpost, prompting the referee to blow the whistle and point at the penalty area. Peza clapped his hands and stood up. Matipa returned to the cooker.

She resumed cooking upset people were telling her son disturbing things about his father. Upon Akar's return, she would inform him about what Peza told her and the people's perception of him. What

business did he have among graves? She would find a way of asking him plainly or in the abstract and hint to him that he was a perceivable weirdo. She didn't want the word to be associated with her husband.

Indeed, he was weird. The macabre fascinated him. Sometime in May that year, he bought a pirated DVD from a flea market. On it was an *ukweshwama* bull-killing Zulu ritual shot in KwaZulu-Natal. She found the First Fruits Festival a sadistic spectacle, but the Zulu young men in hides who demonstrated the depth of their cruelty when they tortured and killed a struggling and terrified bull captivated Akar. The controversial event sickened her. Watching a score of Zulu youths running in the name of culture alongside the distraught bull, ripping out its tongue, gorging its eyes, jerking and mutilating its genitals, stuffing its mouth with handfuls of soil and every kind of dirt, until the animal staggered and fell dead, wasn't easy. Akar watched the video repeatedly, and always seemed appeased when the beast fell dead.

She remembered that about five years ago when the Government of Zimbabwe was looking for a hangman, Akar had shown great interest. He brought home a cutting of an advertisement from *The Sunday Mail* stating Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison had a vacancy for a hangman.

It wasn't money that seemed to entice Akar, but the throng of men on death row, about fifty-five, according to another newspaper article he cut from another paper and brought home a month before. In the cutting, death row inmates pleaded for clemency and urged Human Rights organisations to lobby for the removal of the death penalty from the country's statute books. One of the condemned, a remorseful and self-proclaimed repentant man, was quoted saying he spent twenty-three hours a day confined in a cell and every time guards unlocked the door he shook, thinking the guards had come to take him to the scaffold.

The cutting made disturbing reading, but her husband read it repeatedly with fervent interest. Every time he went through it, he cursed the prison authorities for looking for an elderly candidate with traceable references.

Matipa remembered asking him if he was interested in the post.

"I'm below forty and inexperienced," he answered. "If anyone traced my employment history I'd end up before a military tribunal."

She was surprised. "How would a civilian end up that way?"

His answers were evasive.

"I'm against the death penalty and won't have a hangman for a husband."

"The Old Testament advocates an eye-for-an eye. Search the scriptures, madam."

"If you met the requirements and were given the job," she paused, "would you go on to hang people?"

"Of course, I'm a private individual entitled to following my heart." He gestured at the door, mutely telling her she was free to leave.

It infuriated her. "What do you mean by *private individual* when we're in a marriage?"

He chuckled. "I withdraw the statement. It was a slip of the tongue." Immediately, she remembered, he went on to give her an impromptu lecture on executions. That it was civilised to tolerate the death penalty. That the United States of America was executing her condemned at a faster rate than ever before. That during American presidential campaigns every candidate proclaimed his or her unwavering support for the death sentence if the electorate were to view him or her seriously. That the advanced country, together with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, China and Saudi Arabia, accounted for over eighty-five percent of the world's state executions. In conclusion, he told her a hangman was *an unavoidable evil* supported by the Laws of the land to clean society of scumbags.

His knowledge of the subject shocked her.

“Arabians prefer the sword. A clean sweep and a head rolls on the sand. The Americans use the electric chair and lethal injections.”

He knew a lot of other nitty-gritty. For instance, that the precise location of Texas' execution chamber was in Huntsville. That in 1992 Mr Bill Clinton was such a staunch supporter of the death penalty that he flew to Arkansas to oversee the execution of one Ricky Ray Rector, a condemned man with severe brain damage. That at one point Florida's electric chair appeared before the Supreme Court after it set some inmates on fire.

“The same chair took long to kill one Allen Lee Davis,” he said calmly. “The man weighed about a hundred and thirty-six kilograms. He convulsed and contorted and bled for a long time, sending murmurs in the gallery.”

She didn't know until then of such facts. If what he told her was true, she concluded the carnal wish for retribution ran uncomfortably deep in the United States of America, a country she had thought was fundamentally God-fearing.

“My preference is the noose,” he added, “because of its sombre drama, the grave apparel of the hangman and its priestly ritual.”

She decided to test him. “How do you want to be executed in the event you're condemned and given a choice?”

“By firing squad.” He didn't elaborate.

Chapter 3

Anticipating an uplifting, Binga Jochoma alighted from the bus about forty-five kilometres away at a small roadside rural village near Empress Mine. Through endless refresher courses, the army had taught him systematic self-improvement. In that vein, he pursued excellence and dominance in his line of work.

In the village, clusters of sorrowful pole and clay huts, he inquired around and made for the homestead of a sorcerer. He had heard many people commending the diviner. Rumour had it that though the man's treatment success rate was poor, he had devastating spells and goblins and good protective elixirs. Essentially, the man was a juju master of Malawian descent. Many people had dislocated mouths because of sorcerers. Most Malawian men were members of *Gule Wamkulu*, the Great Dance, or the *Nyanu* brotherhood, a secret society and interface with the world of spirits that camped among the dead.

Darkness shrouded the homestead of the Malawian when Binga arrived. He found the sorcerer, a childless widower of about sixty and seemingly a famine victim, standing expectantly at the entrance of a barbed-wire fenced homestead.

The diviner addressed him first. "My name is Mjomba. I welcome you to my homestead. I'll be of service to you, *insha-Allah*." He was a rickety man in torn khaki trousers, commonly the uniform of canteen staff. He wore an old stripped jacket next to his skin.

"Thank you," Binga said. "My name is—"

"*Allahamdulilab!*" The old man interjected in Arabic. "I greet you and welcome you, Binga. Your parents are late. Cholera killed them three years ago."

The accuracy of the man's information stunned and mystified Binga. He shook Mjomba's hand.

“You heard about me, therefore you came. The works and acts of a good sorcerer can fly taller than a country’s flag. Don’t be afraid. Follow me.”

Binga followed the man to a candle-lit consultation hut.

“*Allahamdulilah!*” The old man repeated as he walked. “*Rakmaan rahim. Riyasat albarakat albaiid. Malike yaumedini. Allah qarib wa baiid!*”

From the Islamic recitals, or declarations, Binga guessed the man was happy to see him. He wondered if the man sympathised with the late Osama bin Laden, or perceived Binga as an infidel. The shrivelled man appeared to be in a world of his own. There were chances he was a disgrace to whatever modern Muslims stood for. However, Binga wondered what would happened if Islamic fundamentalists discovered the sorcerer, given his said prowess in juju. The man could prove an asset in the establishment of a New World Islamic Order, the caliphate, by rendering suicide bombers invisible or making them look like White House interns.

The old man recited more verses as he led him through a torn reed mat improvised as a door. The mat covered the entrance to a small grass-thatched detached hut of pole and clay that couldn’t sit more than five people. Mediumistic paraphernalia were in the room reeking of crushed or ground barks. Binga saw corked cattle and goat horns, gourds decorated with intricate beadwork consisting of various colours, small wooden idols with beads around their necks, animal skulls and many other ritualistic things. The items were on the floor and on the walls. A dead owl hung upside down on the apex. A cock roamed on the floor. Placed against the wall was a battered Saratoga trunk. A copy of the Holy Koran, equally worn out, was on the trunk.

Mjomba sat on a low hewn stool, the only one in the room. Binga sat facing him on an animal hide on the floor. A mummified head of a hyena was at one end of the hide. Binga took a good look at the cock as it leisurely went over his spread-out legs. A small hand-sewn pillow-like amulet was around one of its legs. He guessed the cock

was a spirit-possessed live component testament of Mjomba's harnessing powers. Binga was pleased and impressed beyond measure.

Mjomba stared at the cock and exclaimed, "*Allahamdulilah!*" He looked at his visitor. "I'm glad you aren't born-again. If you were a Christian, the cock would've kept its distance from you. My charms wouldn't work for you. *Insha-Allah*, my charms will labour for you." He pointed at the three candles in the room. "I was expecting you; hence I lit them in readiness."

The cock perched on the Koran and crowed quietly, looking up at the Malawian. He said something to the fowl in a language that sounded Arabic. The bird responded with a brief crocking sound.

"The cock confirms you're neither Christian nor Catholic," the old man said, nodding gratefully. "Allah, most gracious, most compassionate, be praised. He made you non-available to these manmade religions." He looked at the cock, which was staring at him. It crocked again. When it fell silent he continued, but his eyes were on the fowl. "Against the born-again, their bible says: *seeing, they see not: and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.*"

The cock made more sounds and he fell silent.

Later on, it stopped and he continued in the same manner, his eyes on the fowl. "Al-Koran says against the same born-again: *deaf, dumb and blind, they'll not return...to the path of Allah, of course.*"

Binga wondered what the *n'anga* was driving at. He wasn't in his consultation room to convert to Islam. Then it dawned on him the old man was tactfully buying time as he communicated with the cock.

"It's further written in the Al-Koran: *In their heart is a disease; and Allah has increased their disease: and grievous is their penalty, because they're false unto themselves.*" The man looked at him squarely and chuckled briefly. "Many people who don't understand the power of African juju would find your plans far-fetched, absurd and preposterous. White men would deem you mad."

The *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre Museum came to his mind. Binga smiled with satisfaction.

He glanced at the cock before proceeding. “I see a painting on a piece of wood. Your eyes are set on an old painting of a woman with a unique smile. The work is in a secure building overseas. In your mind the painting is your stepping stone to a world you yearned for ever since you were a teenager.”

The sorcerer was precise. Binga nodded.

“The painting is a famous celebration. It attracts thousands of tourists.”

Binga nodded eagerly. “It’s a painting by Leonardo da Vinci worth—”

The old man raised a hand, stopping him in mid-sentence. “Don’t tell me anything. I see everything, ex-soldier. I see a number prefaced by twenty and followed by six zeros.”

“Correct, sir. The masterpiece is worth over twenty million US dollars.”

“Many rich people would want to buy it.” The Malawian paused and chuckled again. “Many learned criminal gangs comprising engineers, locksmiths, computer experts and celebrated conmen laid their hands on the *Mona Lisa*. But they failed to take it out of the building and were incarcerated.”

Binga sat up, thunderstruck with the manner he seemed to be reading his mind and seeing the masterpiece and the museum in Paris. Apparently, the poor man had never left the African continent. In the *Musée du Louvre*, the grandest museum in the world harbouring many famous artworks of ancient and modern masters, the old man had singled the masterpiece Binga died to lay his hands on.

“It’s the most expensive and celebrated painting in the world,” Mjomba went on. “I can see a grand building in a modern city. Armed men, surveillance cameras, an intricate alarm system and a fortress-like architecture protect the building’s treasures twenty-four

hours a day all year round. The chamber in which the painting hangs has extra security measures.”

“I need juju. I want to lay my hands on the masterpiece.”

“I know your aspirations. Buyers are willing to pay a fortune for the painting. You need special juju for you to take it out of the building undetected.”

“That’s exactly what I want, sir. Give me a charm that’ll make the painting and me invisible. I promise to pay you handsomely on my return. You won’t live in squalor anymore.”

His face contorted. “My idea of wealth is the charms, spells and goblins in my possession. I’ve more firepower than a squadron of US marines,” he boasted. “Are you brave?” he suddenly asked, reaching for a wooden bowl near the trunk and placing it before Binga.

Binga nodded again. “I fought in the DRC. I’ve killed many people.”

“Do you regret killing Congolese and Rwandese men?”

What’s he driving at? Binga asked himself perplexed. *Is the juju man trying to play a psychological counsellor?* “I killed in the line of duty.”

“Good.” His eyes rested on the cock. “You worked with the dedication of an Imam. A person of your calibre can’t afford to be remorseful.” He looked at Binga and smiled warmly.

Binga expected him to say something pleasant.

“In this modern world of equal rights and human rights of no relevance to Allah, if one doesn’t kill, one won’t achieve anything monumental. The Israelites led by Moses and Joshua, the peace of Allah be upon them, slaughtered the armies of the pagan tribes that stood in their way to the Promised Land.” His smile faded. “I tell you this so that you won’t leave room in your heart for regret. If ever you regret shedding blood my spells will turn against you.”

Binga figured it was a stern warning. “I understand.”

“It’ll cost you hundred dollars and a little courage,” Mjomba said, gesturing at the bowl.

Binga fished a hundred-dollar banknote from the breast pocket of his shirt, an amount he had long spared for the visit. He placed the money in the bowl.

“You carry a small axe the size of a man’s forearm. Present it.”

He leaned back to draw a small axe tacked in the front of his trousers like a pistol. It clattered inside his pants as it hit against a special pair of collapsible binoculars. The latter was a military issue from the Commando Regiment. The axe and the pair of binoculars were essential to his forays. When he was at Sakis Mine, he hid the items in a cairn in the graveyard, the axe out of stipulation and the binoculars out of necessity. Matipa knew nothing of their existence. The axe had red and blue beadwork at the end of its handle, and a thin strip of a mediumistic cloth dominantly red with decorations of black and white dots and sergeant-like arrows. He sat up and put the axe on the floor near the bowl.

“You’re a very discreet man,” the diviner said matter-of-factly. “Your customary wife thinks your parents are in Matobo Village near Bulawayo. Of the three women in your life, only Nomathemba knows you’re from Chikukwa Village in Chimanimani. In the event of your death Matipa’ll arrange for your body to be taken to the wrong people on the understanding they’re your relatives when in fact you paid a charlatan to pose as your father when you married her.”

It was all true. Binga’s bogus father, a talkative drunkard on Binga’s leash in the name of millet beer, accompanied him to Mungorwenyi Village in Nyanga as his father. Binga couldn’t have persuaded his Christian parents to let him marry Matipa, a second wife, when they had high opinions of his legitimate wife and were ever despising polygamous marriages as heartless unions of modern barbarians.

The cock stepped from the Koran onto the trunk where it paused before hopping to the floor. It circled Binga once. He steeled himself against following its movements with his eyes in case the Malawian

was testing him for courage. The bird went round him for the second and third time. Then it walked out under the reed mat, which was the door. He heard the sound of flapping wings and diminishing crowing.

Mjomba took the axe and rubbed spittle on its handle with his tongue. He chanted Islamic verses in quick succession and sniffed the mediumistic cloth. “I’ve blessed it. Observe the things to be observed in its keeping as instructed by the sorcerer who endowed it with the spirit of death.”

A powerful Tonga witch doctor in remote Sianychudu Village near Lake Kariba initially sanctified the axe. The same man instructed Binga to keep the axe in graveyards. Binga never told anyone about his visit to the witch doctor many years ago. “I keep it in graveyards as bidden.”

Mjomba took a long python skin from the trunk and placed it around Binga’s neck like a scarf. He took out several dirty containers meant for cosmetics but now filled with different ground herbs and other substances. From each, he drew a pinch with his right hand and put it in his cupped left hand until a small mound stood on his palm.

“Remove all your clothes and lie on the hide,” he ordered.

Binga complied, and cupped his hands over his loins.

The man crouched by his side and smeared Binga with the mixture of powders beginning on the forehead. He worked his way downwards, slowly and diligently taking care to smear every frontal area of his body like a thorough massage therapist, only that he was impersonal to the point of inflicting pain. Binga made faces but the *n’anga* took no notice, then he resorted to grunting in apparent pain but the man went on undeterred. When he got to Binga’s midsection, he brushed aside Binga’s hands and held his manhood in his left hand.

“I’m pleased to see you’re circumcised, otherwise my holy hand wouldn’t have touched your organ. When you become rich, you’ll follow Mike Tyson’s footsteps and convert to Islam, the only true

religion and way of life Allah recognises, blessed be the name forever.”

Binga remained quiet. Disclosing to the diviner that he went for circumcision merely to reduce his risks of contracting HIV might upset the Malawian. However, he digested the old man’s last statement: *When you become rich, you’ll follow Mike Tyson’s footsteps and convert to Islam, the only true religion and way of life recognised by Allah, blessed be the name forever.* The statement was ambiguous. Was it a prediction or was the diviner suggesting he convert to Islam on becoming rich?

However, the utterance seemed like third party confirmation of Prophet Jatropha’s prophecy that he would be rich some day. By suggesting his wealth would come from the ground, he thought the prophet had erred. He was going to rob the Louvre Museum of its multi-million dollar *Mona Lisa*. Either way lay an assurance of wealth. Though the Malawian was contented with his wealth of goblins and charms, Binga knew the old man could do with a million or half a million dollars.

Mjomba chanted in the foreign tongue as before. Strangely, Binga felt something enter him from the fist of the old man into his loins. Like a heat wave, it spread into his body. The man placed the Koran on Binga’s belly as wind whirled in the small hut. The book flung open. Pages flipped in the wind and stopped when the wind died shortly. The *n’anga* leaned over and read from a section of a page that had opened, but his left hand continued to hold firmly Binga’s manhood.

As he read the Koran, unhurriedly and mechanically, heat mounted in Binga’s body to uncomfortable levels. Binga winced. The *n’anga* continued to read until sweat beads stood on the old man’s forehead. The heat became unbearable. He attempted to rise but Mjomba and the room began to spin in his eyes. Binga passed out.

When he came to, it was perhaps thirty minutes later. Recently lit candles stood where the three others had. A pair of bone-joined horns of a bull was on his chest. The lid of the trunk was open. The

Holy Koran was by his side. He was still lying on the hide of the hyena. When he removed the horns from his chest, he sat up to inspect what his head had rested on: the skin of the python was now bundled into a pillow. His body hurt in many places and he was exceedingly weak. The Malawian had cut incisions in his forehead, in the centre of his chest, in his thighs, in his calves, and in his fundament. Blood trickled from the paired razor cuts stuffed with dark ground herbs and fat. The axe was in his right hand.

Neither Mjomba nor the cock was in sight. However, he guessed he wasn't alone. This was no ordinary consultation room. He had to be in the presence of innumerable goblins. The Malawian seemed to have known that he had come to and entered the room holding a small corked gourd beaded in its nipped-in midsection.

"Rise and dress up," Mjomba ordered him again. "We must leave before daybreak."

Only then did Binga realise he had passed out for far much longer than he thought. He was feeble. It cost him effort to sit up. The double incisions in his chest hurt more than the rest. He suspected the old man had cut deep into the skin to the sternum.

Afterwards, he stood fully clothed outside the hut, the axe tucked in his trousers, as Mjomba blew out the candles. The *n'anga* emerged from the hut and led Binga into the forest towards some hills not far away in the north. The outline of the hills, optically bloated by the Great Dyke range of mountains far beyond them, was apparent evidence a new day was dawning. The old man walked with a springy agility befitting a teenager. Occasionally Binga had to trot to catch up with him. A handful of cocks crowed in the Malawian's sleepy village behind them. The footpath was a narrow corridor bordered by knee-high dewy grass. Binga's pair of trousers was soon thoroughly wet. Not long after, his thigh muscles began to hurt a little from the strain of gaining altitude on numbing legs.

After walking quite a distance, Mjomba started to whistle continuously in seeming compensation to the natural orchestra of

insects they silenced with their footsteps. Binga found himself adjusting his gaiety to the tune of the man's quiet whistling. He had just trotted to catch up with the old man when his foot hit a snag and he fell though he was quick enough to break the fall with his hands. He let out a cry to attract the *n'anga* and slow him down, the idea being to see if the man was still himself or had become some apparition. Mjomba kept whistling and walking.

Binga rose and trotted to him, doubt starting to cloud his mind. A juju man of his certitude could remain at home and send his image on errands. Malawian miners were infamous for sending their images underground to do their shift work. Other miners bearing counter-charms saw tireless baboons drilling with jackhammers, shovelling ore or driving trolleys. Baboons allegedly contributed large sums of money into the coffers of mining conglomerates. Perhaps, thought Binga, cunning mine managers knew what was happening all along, the reason they recruited and kept many Malawians in their mines, including those past retirement age.

They ascended the hills after walking for about an hour. The serpentine footpath took them to the top, which Binga reached on all his limbs like some drunken quadrant. He lagged more than hundred metres behind Mjomba already descending on the other side. The man was just too energetic and enduring for his age.

Binga had to catch his breath. Despite panting, a burning sensation built in his chest. He needed rest desperately, or he would pass out again. Darkness had thinned considerably when he sat on a low rock boulder on top of the hill by the side of the footpath, all the while wondering what had drained him of the strength and endurance of a commando coiled in his sinewy muscles. Around him, the world stood in silhouettes.

For half a year, he had undergone basic military training at the Zimbabwe National Army's Recruit & Training Depot in Nyanga, carrying a heavy kit on his back, four magazines and a loaded AK 47 rifle. He furthered the training with more exerting itinerary refresher

and advanced courses. Because he excelled, was strong and enduring, the army conscripted him into the elite Commando Regiment in Harare. However, the regiment didn't just open its doors to anyone without verification; no matter how highly recommended one was on paper.

The Commando Regiment tested the endurance of a man for one long grilling month at its infamous Wafa-Wafa Training Camp in Kariba. At the camp, men growled and groaned like animals. A number stalled, sunk on their knees and slumped dead. Death during selection and the two-months skills training that ensued was common. The regiment consisted of men who could survive the toughest conditions and live for days on end on minimum rations and water, but remained optimally lethal. These men were the ever-advancing savages the country relied upon as its last line of defence. When retreating, a commando was even more lethal and could route a platoon.

Under the regiment, he had run long distances across hills and mountains, covering distances over thirty kilometres in under one hour, at the end of which he would dig a standard military trench together with an adjacent sleeping bay. When the trainees had pitched tents and thought they'd resign themselves to total rest, trainers issued orders to fill the trenches, pack everything and vacate the area in less than twenty minutes. The next destination would be a further twenty to thirty kilometres in the forest. He had done this several times burdened by a full military kit, a loaded AK 47 rifle and a fifteen-kg sandbag that taxed a man to the soul. Now suddenly, at thirty-three years old, he couldn't keep pace with an old man.

Below, Mjomba stopped, turned and looked up at him. By bringing his hands to his elbows and knees, Binga gestured that he was powerless. Mjomba's silhouette stood transfixed, the darkness and the distance forbidding Binga to read the expression on his face. In the distance below, a bull bellowed. He knew that not far from the hills could be another village, or a stray bull. However, the bellow

rang something in his head. He furrowed his face in a bid to remember, and it came to him that that very night while he lay on the hide of the hyena in Mjomba's consultation hut, he had an elaborate nightmare, which featured the *n'anga* and a thickset black bull. He recalled it clearly, especially the horns of the bull that were outstanding in their length and as pointed as stabbing spears:

The beast was Zebu. It stood its ground in a small but high-walled wooden kraal. Mjomba stood behind the animal wielding a whip. Binga and the bull faced each other in the kraal, three paces between them. He was a matador in sleek elaborate bullfighting costumes; a flamboyant montero on his head with intricate embroidery, a white frilled high-collared dress shirt tucked into skin-tight black hose pants reaching slightly below his knees, both secured by a cincture-like yellow silk belt, a short golden tie, white knee-high socks, and skin-tight black hose pants. He was in the traje de luces, the revered bullfighting 'suit of lights', performing a series of formalised actions with a red cape in his left hand. Finally, he stopped and stood akimbo, to gain his breath and study the beast before him.

The bull's eyes were bloodshot and penetrating. It stood rooted, staring at him and digging the ground with its hind hooves. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. His right hand was empty. He should be holding the estoque, the short stabbing sword, in his right hand, with which he would dispatch the bull with a thrust between the shoulder blades. An ambivalent voice warned him matadors often perished in the arena.

At that point, the name Manolete, a bullfighter gored to death in the arena in 1947, crossed his mind. Binga looked around the kraal-cum-arena. Desolate graves in mute silence and shrouded in darkness stared back at him and the beast. Who was going to bail him?

The n'anga raised the whip and bit his lower lip. The Malawian lashed the bull once across its back with all his strength and climbed out of the kraal. The bull groaned, brought its horns down and dashed towards Binga. It overtook him as he turned to jump out of the way. Blood spurted from his left calf; the tip of one of its horns had cut him in the leg. He fell, but the bull stopped and turned. He had to rise quickly or the animal would trample or gore him. He was barely on

his feet when the animal lowered its horns and charged again at him, and he made the same mistake. The bull overtook him as he fell, blood spurting from his right calf. He rose and wobbled backwards towards the wall of the kraal. It caught up with him before he could execute his defence. It turned, overtaking him sideward. As it passed him to whirl round, he looked down at his left thigh hurt badly. The bull had cut a gulf in the thigh, and had already turned and was charging again. His pants and socks were torn and bloody. In a similar fashion, it inflicted another wound in his right thigh, and, as before, rumbled past him like a compact avalanche.

Military knowledge told him the battle was asymmetrical; the strength of the fighting parties was inverseely unbalanced. No better situation called for retreat than this one. Graves were the spectators. He wasn't going to lose face.

Binga dived at the walls of the kraal in a bid to scurry to safety in the graveyard. The bull was swift. He was half-way up the high poles when the beast passed below him. He closed his eyes in agony as a horn cut his buttocks one after the other in quick succession. The impact hurled him back into the kraal. He fell badly, hitting the ground forehead first, which dazed him. Sand grains entered his eyes and stung them. He just had to rise to prevent the worst happening to him. He staggered to his feet, his brain frantically processing a thousand things at once as he peered at the world through hurting eyes. The black bull stood before him, its nostrils flaring in demented distress. Using its hind hooves, it scooped cupfuls of earth. His fundament hurt and he tried to nurse it with his hand. His legs were drenched in his blood.

The bull charged at him and turned, striking his sternum with the tip of its horn, and piercing it. The impact tossed him. He somersaulted several times in mid-air before hitting against the poles and slumping to the ground, head first. Instinct hinted him to rise. He did, laboriously, as the animal positioned itself for another attack. Because he felt he was too wounded and weak and had lost a lot of blood to climb the wall of the kraal, he turned and crouched in a vain attempt to get out through a gap in the fence. The beast's hooves clangoured. It ran past him, having cut his shoulder blade. He was determined to escape and continued unhindered in his attempt. The bull passed him again, ripping his other shoulder blade.

Mjomba appeared before him with the whip, and ruthlessly lashed his head and shoulders, drawing blood, until he fell back into the pen on his belly. The bull sniffed him in the face as he lay motionless, resigned to whatever killing method at the disposal of the animal. It continued to sniff his face and he raised his head inquisitively. The bull walked away for momentum. This was it, he thought, there was nowhere to run. If he had to die, he preferred to die that instant without prolonging his death. Binga knelt and lowered his head down to align his forehead with the bull's horns. If it could gore him in the forehead, he would die in seconds.

The beast flared its nostrils. He closed his eyes as it came for him, the noise of a thousand clattering hooves accompanying it. He felt the impact in the centre of his forehead, right where he had intended it to gore him. Apart from that, he felt nothing, which induced him to open his eyes. When he did, he realised the bull had assumed a black mercurial form and was pouring itself into him through the forehead. Binga passed out in the dream.

Perhaps the fight with the bull accounted for his bone-weariness, he pondered, looking down at Mjomba below. The *n'anga's* fading silhouette beckoned him to come down. Binga made the gestures again.

The old man responded with angry frantic gestures.

He rose, but it cost him much grunting, wincing and effort, and brought a lot of furrows and sweat beads on his brow. Slowly he staggered towards the figure below, manoeuvring his way round boulders and shrubs, while most of the time hanging on to them to avoid slipping and rolling down. He couldn't have taken the footpath down; it lacked tall shrubbery necessary for grabbing for his descent. With the slow motion of one terminally ill and set to die any minute, he descended.

All his muscles hurt. He tried to remind himself that he was a trained military man, to give himself strength, but it didn't work. On the contrary, it brought him frustration. He wondered how something that had taken place in a dream exhausted him. It confounded him that he had come seeking strength only to lose it.

The spots where the bull had gored him were exactly where Mjomba had cut him with a razor blade.

Binga reached Mjomba after several minutes. The footpath was now parallel to the range of hills. Between them and the hills stretched about fifty metres of impenetrable thorny thickets. Daylight was emerging in the distance, rapidly displacing the darkness and giving the silhouettes details.

Binga stopped a pace from the old man, expecting to see a displeased face, but the *n'anga's* countenance was indifferent. He shook Binga's hand. Binga felt a nuance of vigour rise within him for the brief duration of the handshake, slightly replenishing his strength. Mjomba led Binga a little further from where they stood. Here the thickets thinned considerably and a vertical rugged face on the slope zigzagged up the hill. On the foot of the face was a grassy patch the size of a blanket. Two shady large cork trees flanked the verdant patch.

The old man stared at the face of the hill, his countenance reverent. Binga followed his gaze with his eyes. The place uphill seemed their destination for further rituals. Between them and the phenomenon of the Malawian's captivation lay natural impediments that dampened perseverance. The hill was a collection of kopjes on a naturally raised ridge. Tall trees jutted from it here and there, and it was a collection of secluded recesses. Somewhere, thought Binga, a python could be laying in ambush for an occasional hare, stray goat or duiker.

Wordlessly, Mjomba led him uphill on a gentle slope, negotiating their way through stumbling foliage and round thorn bushes, anthills and rock boulders, until the exposed face came into their view again. While Mjomba practised no caution, Binga kept an eye for pythons and venomous snakes, his knowledge of serpents confronting him. He scrutinised boughs before he stooped under any to pass, because black mambas hung from boughs and struck the crowns of their victims.

On the ground, he was wary of stepping on cobras and puffer adders rife in the area. However, he kept an eye for the Gabon viper. The poison of this stealth predator, which appeared like a cross between a puff adder and a python, killed a man within five minutes. The threat of black mambas was both overhead and on the ground. In the underbrush, a mamba reared its head above the tallest grasses and struck an erect man on the forehead and chest until he was as black as it was, and lay inert. The mamba camped by the victim. In the event the stricken victim moved, voluntarily or otherwise, even a toe or a finger in the vagaries of death, the snake would strike again, repeatedly, until the victim was motionless. Of all the snakes, this was the only one that did a thorough job.

They edged towards the exposed face, but in the low dry grass between the cork trees, Binga discerned a movement. Something was moving in the grass, its head held high. It could only be a large venomous snake, most likely a cobra. Binga reasoned Mjomba's ageing eyes were failing to see it. He grabbed the *n'anga* by the shoulder forcing him to stop. Binga pointed ahead in the grass, his mouth agape. The Malawian didn't bother to look at what he was pointing at; instead, he shrugged off Binga's grip and moved on. On reaching the spot, Binga's eyes widened. He retreated some paces. The cock with the charm was waiting for them. While its plumage gave it away, the charm confirmed it as the fowl he saw earlier, which he had mistaken for a snake.

Shards of pottery and broken wooden bowls littered the patch of grass before the sealed grove. The waste was confirmation of innumerable rituals performed at the spot. Mjomba removed his shoes and squatted in reverence. Binga did likewise, but behind him. The cock squatted too, facing the slope.

"Here," began the old man, "repose the remains of Mupamombe, the father of all the spirits in this area from Gweru to Chegutu. His people interred his remains in this hill. We are at the point of entry of the pall-bearers." He pointed at a stone-filled impression of a once

large grove into the hill. “Mupamombe was a seer.” The *n’anga* spoke slowly and quietly, like one who didn’t want to wake a sleeping person nearby. “He was a hunter, a warrior and territorial medium. He blessed the land and presided at the coronation of chiefs.”

The cock crowed.

“Today, without his blessings, no one can thrive in any business from Gweru to Chegutu. When the diviner walked this earth, missionaries paid him homage. By day, they disparaged Nicodemus, yet by night, they knelt before Mupamombe. They did it so that people could honour God. If they hadn’t done that the missionaries wouldn’t have converted a single person from Gweru to Chegutu.” He looked over his shoulder at Binga.

Binga nodded understanding.

Mjomba continued slowly in his lowered voice. “Mupamombe blessed the missionaries because he feared God. I also fear God, which is why I make sacrifices every time my charms kill someone. However, they kill bad people who’re also enemies of God. I kill people who bad-mouth me and demean my powers. Those who look down on my powers, despise He who gave me the powers.” He rattled on quietly for some time, digressing from the purpose of their visit.

Binga suspected the Malawian sought to delude the Father of spirits into forgiving him. He took it everyone was righteous before the Lord until the Day of Judgment.

After a long while, Mjomba stopped his apologetic discourse. “Pray here occasionally, to render you and the ancestral spirit one. I’ve taken you to the well. Don’t return to my homestead for water to quench your thirst again. I’m not saying you shouldn’t set foot in my homestead again. You should, constantly, with humble amounts of money for my daily bread. Daily as you hunt, I shall pray for you ceaselessly.”

The *n’anga* took a snuff container from the breast pocket of his old checked jacket and showed Binga how to pray to the ancestral

spirit. When the two clapped hands in supplication, having cast snuff on the ground and on the face of the slope, the cock rose and crowed almost endlessly, flapping its wings.

Mjomba smiled. “*Allahamdulilah!*” He turned to Binga and spoke above the noise of the fowl. “Praise Allah, the Lord of the worlds. Congratulations!”

He shook Binga’s hand again and all his strength returned.

“You came looking for invisibility. The cock convinced me you needed strength and fortification first.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“For the invisibility you crave so much, I refer you to a naked Sufi hermit in the Pelangemuti Forest in Chipinge. The mystic is at the confluence of the forest’s two rivers. He’ll demand a gourd of human blood, preferably albino blood. His charms will turn you into a shadow. In the meantime, use the tremendous strength I’ve vested in you. You shall excel, *insha-Allah*.” He pointed at the cock already on the way back to the village.

The two men followed the fowl; Binga more convinced than ever he would be rich.

Chapter 4

Cocks in the mine compound and far beyond crowed, heralding the breaking of a new day. Nine days had passed since Matipa's husband sneaked out of the compound. As usual, she had no idea where he was. A gamut of images of Akar in compromising positions with women flickered relentlessly in her imagination. Peza kept asking questions. She counted the days painfully.

Woken by the cocks, Matipa lay half-asleep in the waning darkness of a sparsely furnished bedroom, hesitant to slide out of the blankets into the chill of a dreary, dewy morning. The yard needed sweeping after an unforgettable omen-laden night of roaring wind interrupted by hooting owls and the long, mournful cries of a solitary jackal that wandered into the compound. Against all odds, she assured herself the jackal and its cries weren't an evil omen. The cocks continued to crow.

Oh, God, she reflected, classic time-conscious dastards. Didn't they know this was November, the dawn of the festive season? En bloc, they'd die when families celebrated Christmas. Whether Christmas was in honour of manmade gods or a hijacked pagan occupation, satanic through and through, she thought, God had endowed cocks with the ability to tell time with precision, but had blinded them to the advent of their death. If only they knew, the cocks had no cause to celebrate.

The paradox that people shed blood when celebrating crossed her mind, unsettling her as she recalled the prophecy delivered on the eve of the New Year—that a man, in exactitude Mr Emedhi, would split heads open with an axe. She thought of the jackal that visited the compound. At about 3 am, growing cries of the animal woke her. Worse still, they came from the western forest. In the west, the sun was setting, triggering blanketing darkness. Unlike the east, the west

was a perceivable evil, more so in dreams. She was fully awake when she heard the animal cries getting closer to their house, unhinging her senses with fear despite her stalwart belief in an all-protecting God. People believed a crying stray jackal in a compound or village was a harbinger of evil. She feared imminent eviction.

After a few minutes of idling on the bed, she yawned and overcame her hesitation. Fully dressed now, she left the bedroom, crossed into the sitting room and stepped over the semi-visible figure of Peza covered in blankets on the floor. She unlatched and unlocked the main door before picking a traditional broom leaning against it. Cold, rain-burdened air hit her in the face and bosom when she pulled the door open and stood on the threshold.

The morning was steely and grey. The rising sun was a bloody ball with a backdrop of grotesque clouds, draconian churning thunderheads that gave the impression of dragons and ghouls on a restless mythological marquee. She shuddered at the sight. Haplessness and gloom seemed ominous. She wondered where the undercurrent of negativity in her perceptions was coming from. Was the fear of the unknown alienating her from sanity?

Perhaps during the night, when jackals were crying and owls were hooting, she had also dreamt of mythological monsters or derelict graves with a backdrop of reddish thunderstorm clouds threatening to drown her world with blood, of late her frequent nightmares. In such dreams, her dead patriarchal ancestors she denounced at the apostolic shrine when she converted to follow Baba Johannes, walked about calling her name, a call to limbo. She hid from her roaming ancestors behind tombstones.

She wanted to fathom her fears, but her mind roamed a consortium of hideous cul-de-sacs. Her heart thudded, a premonition something bad would happen to her. The feeling convinced her she was on the doorstep of an awful experience. Finally, she concluded her fears were an unfounded contrivance, cursing herself for falling for the temptation to watch a rising sun, a phenomenon that rarely

caught a tropical African's attention. Sunrise was ever an insignificant sight to anyone born in the doldrums as shifting sand dunes were to Libyans and Egyptians.

She was certain *Mudzimu Unoera*, a spirit said to have emanated from the severed head of John the Baptist, would protect her. The prophet and the elders preached at the shrine that when Herod's daughter tried to keep the sacred head of the slain prophet as a souvenir on a mantle, it decayed within days, forcing the royal family to order its casting into the depths of the nearest sea. From the head as it lay on the bed of the sea, *Mudzimu Unoera* erupted, which took possession of the sect's founder member in July of 1932.

The account was an undocumented occurrence hidden to the Bible-thumping Christians. The sect believed Christians worshipped an ungainly, shadowy god created from literature by publicity-mongering white missionaries and present-day commercial evangelists. The sect accused missionaries and evangelists of founding a thriving industry out of the poverty and suffering of Christ.

Something about the sun caught her attention. Squinting, she shrank from fear. The ball of fire inching above the distant ragged eastern mountains was a mercurial, blinding molten gold nugget. The rays stung her eyes. Tears immediately welled in them. She blinked several times and looked at her feet. She was standing on an assortment of rattling dead leaves windswept to her doorstep overnight.

She glanced at the sun again, only to realise it was its usual self, colour, brightness and all. It appeared what frightened her was its cloudy nightmarish backdrop. Nothing about the natural fiery ball had changed, being neither bloody nor too mercurial. She focused on the backdrop again. Clouds that had seemed threatening were unfurling and merry, evoking a feeling of inexplicable freedom. Immediately she cursed the foolishness of a run-away imagination conjuring scary things.

Now a child fascinated by motion, she watched the clouds and their movements. They were dividing and subdividing, merging, blending and overlapping, only to drift apart and fuse with adjacent ones in a never-ending and ever-changing fresco only the hand of God could paint. Suddenly the sky resembled a sunlit heavenly floral quilt with irregular splashes of blue, rusty near the sun. Small clouds a little further from the sun appeared like lacquered dandelions and marigolds, while those furthest from it seemed like delphiniums.

Astonishingly, the mosaic frightened her again, nearly calling something to her mind she knew or had to remember. The hint glared at her in the sky, but what it was she *knew* or had to recall evaded her. Wondering if she wasn't on the verge of losing her sanity, Matipa shuddered at the semblance of horror in a scenic phenomenon. Had she inadvertently become juvenile, moronic and pessimistic, entertaining baseless fears and perceiving gloom in serene images? Punctually, she derived solace from the understanding that at times the things the mind conjured were elusory and phantasmagorical.

She turned to sweeping the yard with the broom; long pruned grass, thrashed and secured. Humming and thinking about the omnipresence of the Alpha and Omega, she swept systematically. God alone quelled her fears. She was in the hands of God; she had no cause to worry. However, when she came across the spoor of the jackal her faith in God dwindled. Arms akimbo and mouth agape, she studied them. The animal entered their yard from the west, trespassing eastwards. They were the prints of a full-grown jackal. She told herself she wasn't superstitious and fear was tantamount to disbelief.

Like superstition, dirt and the spoor had no place in her life. She resumed sweeping, dust rising in clouds around her stooped figure. The dry leaves rustled as she piled them with the broom in a bare, flowerless yard, one of many unfenced similar ones in a cheerless gold-mining compound. The largely shanty dwellings stood on a rich

goldfield. The gold from the mine developed other places except the men who worked at Sakis Mine. Though it irked her that the mine owner was blind to the plight of his workers, she drew consolation from her belief that God would arraign and punish such suckers on Judgment Day. For years, the mining and milling venture had offered no hope for a better future for the common people. She needed to convince her husband to walk out of such unrewarding employment.

She failed to maintain a clear train of thought; an ominous feeling stuck to her. This day, 25 November, what evil did it have in store for her? She hoped her instincts were wrong and her fears unfounded. Yet her instincts hardly lied to her. When her husband proposed love to her, the same instinct told her he would marry her, and he had married her. About seven years ago when she conceived, the same instinct convinced her she was carrying a son, and she had delivered a son.

The day progressed lackadaisically. By noon, nothing had happened, and like mist, the premonition was beginning to lift. She felt she was conquering a nameless evil that day, a conquest she attributed to her fervent prayers after every three hours beginning at six o'clock in the morning. However, she feared the God she bowed to in prayer. He was the very God who had chosen the Israelites and loved them with a passion surpassing erotica. This very God had smitten an entire generation in the middle of a relentless wilderness. She understood God as a profoundly paradoxical Being. With one hand, He blessed, with the other He scalded. Ever since she turned to Him, she had sought to please Him and find favour with Him. However, often she doubted if the God of the Jews was also *Mudzimu Unoera*, which bogged her in uncertainty and fear. The two didn't befit a believer. Was this the reward for shunning adultery, the worship of idols and gossip among other restrictions?

In recent weeks, she had received a prophecy at the apostolic sect's shrine on a hill. Prophet Jatropa prophesied that God loved

her so much that He would express His love for her in the form of two live gifts of her familiarity.

Despite the prophecy's simplicity and paucity, it was enough to trigger an alarm bell within her. The scriptures of her familiarity silently, like a muted liturgical litany, told her she was on a collision course with evil. Despairingly, she understood believers had to conquer insurmountable evil before God could manifest his love and kindness to man. Joseph's brothers had to throw him in the pit and some authorities had to imprison him en route to the governorship.

On New Year's Eve eleven months ago, Prophet Jatropha singled her in the multitude. She recalled his words. "*Madzimai, tell your husband at God's appointed time he'll pick digging tools and embark on digging. Go and say to his face, 'The prophet says when you dig, dig, dig, and dig!' Madzimai, wealth awaits you and your husband underground! If you can turn him from his wickedness, he'll find the wealth sooner than later!*"

The prophecy said *at God's appointed time*, which meant it was a Godly declaration of a better life in the offing, giving her hope and pride God knew her. Nothing could be more elating to a believer. The prophet had used the word *wealth*. The Holy Bible said *wealth maketh friends*. They were going to be charitable and popular. God's gift of wealth to man was always exceedingly abundant. She thought of King Solomon's affluence, his gold and silver and camels and concubines, and understood the riches awaiting them would be innumerable and newsworthy. However, she recalled wealth gave Solomon a fondness for foreign wives and gods. Though she would welcome prosperity, remotely she feared she would lose her husband to exotic mistresses and pagan gods.

Akar received the news with misgivings, interpreting the prophecy as a calculated coercion for him to convert. He told her the prophet should leave non-believers alone. "I don't want to see baboons," he had added sarcastically, pointing at his eyes for emphasis. "For that reason I don't go up any mountain."

The day continued to unfold without incident, real or imagined, or some semblance thereof, until 3 pm. She was sitting in a resin sofa, crocheting a tablecloth while wondering if indeed her husband sneaked into the cemetery, his possible business with the dead and refraining from accepting that he was probably co-habiting with a mistress who could make him forget his family, when Mr Evans Emedhi knocked at her door. He was an office orderly and ran errands for the mine. Seated in the sofa facing the door, she watched Mr Emedhi on the threshold hoping for a hint. What did he want when he knew Akar was away?

The office orderly avoided looking her in the eyes, something that wasn't his custom to her knowledge. He looked like one bearing a message of bereavement but regretting to be the one to break such news.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Muja," he said civilly, standing at the entrance, "But the mill manager wishes to see you immediately."

She stared at him, studying his face, digesting the words one by one against the calculated tone that had borne them. She found offense and asked, "Am I being summoned to Mr Keneas' office, Mr Emedhi? Won't you be kind enough to come in and enlighten me?"

"Mr Keneas instructed me to return to the office immediately." As if she were deaf, he shook his head mildly.

Why was he declining to enter her lounge? Obviously, he couldn't be seeing the room as a poor apology for a lounge. He lived in abject poverty a few metres from their house. In fact, his homestead faced their house about hundred metres away. The Mujas' residence was a rectangular house of pole and unbaked clay. Because their two-roomed house was one of the only two in the compound roofed with corrugated sheets, the fact camouflaged their poverty. The other was the far superior mill manager's planned five-roomed cottage. The European cottage stood detached from the compound's cluster of poor dwellings housing about thirty families. The manager's house stood in stark assortment to the compound.

She had known Mr Emedhi for the three years they had lived on the premises of Sakis Mine. Her husband was arbitrarily in the employ of the mine as a three-stamp gold mill feeder. Akar's employment was questionable. He was always absent without leave and the mine had dismissed him several times, but he had reported for duty despite the expulsions and had remained on the payroll. The ceaseless dismissals and self-reinstatements didn't baffle fellow workers; Akar was a dangerous man. People talked about him in whispers accompanied by disdainful tongue clicking and the vilest curses and epithets.

The hunch that her husband was dead piqued her. She ventured to herself Mr Gilchrist Keneas had received by telephone or otherwise the news of her husband's death. Matipa braced herself against shock and fainting. She drew breath and held it in her lungs, but tears welled in her eyes. Mr Emedhi swam in her sight like a reflection in a rippling pond. She hated Mr Emedhi. *Cursed is he who brings evil tidings*, the words rang in her mind repeatedly. *Cursed is the Devil's messenger for he stands in the presence of Satan and is a tool endowed with disasters*.

Though the community perceived Akar as murderous, he was the warmest man she had ever known. He was both a loving and providing husband. Nevertheless, the truth hurt her. He had never confided in her; he was never her friend and confidante. Wise elders everywhere said marriages based on friendship and trust endured.

She thought about Peza, their only son of six years playing soccer in the compound. His father had possibly orphaned many children. Now, she reflected, God had sanctioned that their son taste how it felt to be fatherless, wondering why God often visited His wrath on innocent children. Her thoughts bordered on cursing the Creator, but she quickly checked herself. The bottom line was that at thirty-three Akar was dead, at twenty-six, she was a widow, and at six Peza was an orphan.

“You can tell me, Mr Emedhi,” she blurted. “I’ve had an apprehensive feeling since morning. I don’t have to face Mr Keneas to learn something terrible has happened to my husband when you know as much as he does.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“But the manager didn’t elaborate, Mrs Muja,” he said, his eyes fixed at a spot on the rough floor. “You could be worrying yourself unnecessarily. He said you should come immediately.”

She wiped her tears and rose from the sofa, telling herself if indeed he was dead, it was irreversible. No amount of mourning would raise him from the dead. *First things first, Matipa*, she said mutely, calming herself. She must learn where his body was for its recovery and burial. Akar was from Matobo about thirty-four kilometres from Bulawayo, where his parents owned a farm. From Sakis Mine to Bulawayo it was about two hundred and eighty-five kilometres. Custom demanded she had to accompany the body all the way until burial. News of Akar’s death, she was sure, would further wreck his aging mother who suffered from chronic high blood pressure, or possibly kill her forthwith.

Matipa told herself she would rather be like Mr Emedhi and not be the one to break the agonising message to Akar’s parents. Someone heartless enough would’ve to do it for her. Now she could see the rationale behind Mr Emedhi’s reticence. Almost dazed, she went through an inner door into the bedroom and sat on the edge of a double bed covered by a floral duvet. Upon sitting on it, a *déjà vu* hazily triggered in her mind. She looked about the room in an attempt to recall something, but the *déjà vu* quickly faded.

She wore a pair of canvas shoes and covered her kinky hair with a white headscarf lying on the bed. Each time she looked at the bed or in its direction, the *déjà vu* revived. Eyes roving, like one searching for a scorpion dashing about on the floral duvet, she rose and scanned the bed as if seeing it for the first time. Surrealistic images flickered in her head, all offering no leads. The more she sought to recall, the more a full recollection eluded her. However, brief occupation with

recollection wasn't without its merits; her tears dried in the process. Perhaps she was simply conjuring things, she reasoned.

She put herself in Mr Emedhi's shoes and pitied him. Though he was a peaceful non-believer, he wasn't immune to prophecies. The Man of God said he would split heads open with an axe. Many people at the shrine knew him. During the first week of the New Year, a group of elders approached him at his homestead but failed to coerce him into accepting the prophecy; therefore, he could neither be baptised sevenfold nor rechristened Aaron. Unsurprisingly, this became the most controversial prophecy in the compound and surrounding areas.

She stood before the wardrobe, a simple plywood unit, and briskly watched her full image in its outward mirror. The headscarf graced her almost like a nun's habit. Her dress was neither too tight nor too loose for other people's comfort, and reaching slightly below the knees, it was neither too long, nor too short for anyone's discomfort. It was white, the sect's prescription for purity and distinction.

As stipulated, she wore no jewellery. The prophet disapproved the wearing of jewellery, arguing it aided the Israelites to mould pagan images and disgrace God. Apart from vanity, he had expounded, there was something inherently waylaying and evil about the wearing of earrings, broaches, bangles, neck-chains and cosmetics. The latter was open admiration of the appearance of ghosts. He associated pedicure, manicure and the wearing of perfumes with prostitutes.

Satisfied she was presentable enough to stand before Mr Gilchrist Keneas in his office, she emerged from the bedroom and looked about the sitting room, which tripled as the kitchen owing to one wall against which was an inexpensive wooden trolley on which was the cheap two-plate electric cooker. In the room stood a kitchen-cum-display unit packed with porcelain cups and dinner plates. At night, the room became Peza's bedroom. He slept on the floor. The

opposite wall was the home of a tubular stand holding a twenty-one inch television set, a DVD player and a satellite decoder, a three-CD changer radio set and numerous CDs and DVDs on a rake.

Discounting the mill manager, proverbially Herod Antipas by virtue of which the workers considered him rich because he dined with Caesar, the Mujas were the most prosperous in the compound. From this indisputable fact, Matipa derived humbling affirmation God looked at her and her family favourably. Their life wasn't a continuous struggle like most people.

She aimlessly returned to the bedroom, her thoughts drifting to her husband. If indeed something had happened to him, perhaps an ecclesiastical season of suffering had come to her and Peza. Every contrast had its time. Maybe it was time they waved goodbye to their life of plenty and comfort, having come to the end of their tether as an affording family. Akar, Peza and she weren't atolls, but an earthly familial trilogy. With Akar out of the equation, the trilogy ceased to be one. Definitely, death had thwarted a version of their future. What would become of her and Peza? The thought of them in desperation was unbearable.

Matipa considered suicide. She would take Akar's body to his people in Matobo and see to it his burial was as decent as possible, after which Peza and she had to die. Soap-like tablets of cyanide in a plastic bag in the bedroom would provide their exit. The substance was in abundance at the mine, being the main ingredient in the trapping and treatment of gold. Beyond the gold mill at the cyanide treatment tanks were large warning signs testament of the hazard of drinking water contaminated with cyanide.

The treatment site had a high fence crowned with barbed cyclone spirals on top. A negligent employee had once left a gate open and a cow had strayed into the site and gulped water from one of the open knee-high brick tanks. The beast bellowed once and burst open around its mid-section. Its eyes turned grey and the carcass bloated instantaneously. Then of course, every incident of suicide that had

happened in all the mining compounds in the area, including theirs, was from taking cyanide.

Prophet Jatropha's end of year prophecy played in her mind. Her reverence of him turned to hatred. The prophet was a blatant liar. Instead of foreseeing the suicide she was contemplating, the charlatan had singled her out and lied to her. On failing to find his motive for lying to her, she cursed him and concluded he was demonic.

She focused on the pertinent issue. If Akar was dead, she would give Peza a cup of water spiced with the odourless substance. Between confirmation of Akar's death and his burial, only a God-given arcane would hold her together until she gave Peza the poison. She would drink from the same poisonous *chalice* before Peza slumped and died, which was a space of a few seconds; she couldn't afford to watch her beloved son sway, gloat and tumble to his death. Even God looked away when the Lamb was set to give up the ghost. God would understand she loved her son so much that she couldn't stand the sight of him fatherless and beggarly in an economically beleaguered country.

"Don't take long, Mrs Muja," Mr Emedhi pleaded, "I don't want Mr Keneas to be cross with me."

What was the mill manager's anger compared to her husband's death? She felt like shouting curses and obscenities at him, but checked herself. He was an obedient messenger bent on pleasing his employer.

"I won't be long," she shouted back, "I'm almost done!"

Her knees were buckling. She sat on the bed and caught her reflection in the wardrobe mirror. Beads of sweat stood on her forehead, more mushrooming.

Where's God? She thought. *Is He alive or dead?*

Chapter 5

Matipa had no idea how long she sat on the bed trying to gather her senses, but instead stared blankly at her reflection. Several times, she heard Mr Emedhi begging her to come out.

She thought of her husband. Akar often said he was a matador, and Peza was a *banderillero*, the bullfighter found in the initial stages of a bullfight. The preliminary fighter lanced the bull with *banderillas*, barbed colourful sticks skilfully placed in the top of the bull's shoulders to stop the beasts from hooking to one side, which could gravely endanger a matador. Her husband, a satellite TV bullfight aficionado, told them a good *banderillero* ran as close to the bull as possible, lancing the beast in the shadow of death. Akar said the crowd judged these daredevil pacesetters, whose *banderillas* corrected dangerous tendencies in the manner the bull charged, on their form and bravery. *Banderillas* often became matadors, the main performing athlete and artist tasked with gracefully dispatching the bull in the final stage. Now with the matador dead, what use would be a *banderillero*?

The family had often watched Spanish and Mexican matadors and *banderillos* gored and disfigured during televised bullfights. The sport sickened her. Some matadors died in the arena. When he was home, she sat by his side and watched the fights for his sake. He was a man with a taste for violent movies and horrific films. If such movies weren't obtaining on TV, he settled for sports channels that aired Russian and American wrestling bouts that drew blood and left some performers critically injured. With passion, he watched documentaries of rodeo tournaments shot in Spain and the Americas.

Sitting on the bed, Matipa saw that his fondness for death and the deathly, including the grim spectacle of the Zulu *ukweshwama* ritual, fanned some malevolent fantasy in him, a fantasy she saw

immediately after marrying him. Back then, she took it in her stride hoping it would be a short-lived infatuation. She came to accept him as a man who lived comfortably in two worlds; one dark and hidden, the other that of everyone in whose enterprise he was a father, loving husband and breadwinner. When throughout the years of their marriage his fondness for the macabre had stuck to him without signs of waning, she had hoped in vain his dark side would remain hidden to her and the community at Sakis Mine. Now her husband was finally dead, everything pointed to it.

"Mrs Muja," Mr Emedhi called outside, "The manager made it clear that I should come with you. I've been standing here for a long time now. I beg you not to make my life difficult."

"I'm no one's prisoner, Mr Emedhi!" she shouted, her face livid. "I know where the office is. I'll follow you shortly."

She heard his footsteps as he walked away, and wiped the sweat on her brow with the flap of her headscarf. To embolden herself, she finally muttered a prayer to Michael, the archangel of war and courage. Then she stood up, crossed herself thrice and walked towards the door.

With the house locked and the key tacked in a cup of her brassiere against her breast, she walked away from the house towards the mill site. However, the noise of children playing soccer in an open space in the middle of the compound's huts caught her attention. Pausing, she looked in the direction of the noise and saw Peza playing soccer with his age-mates. Like a jillion Buffalo, after creating elbowroom, Peza bulldozed his way through batteries of defenders to score spectacularly to applause from onlookers and Matipa's admiration. Her son was the sole proud owner of a genuine leather Olympics-standards football, the latest FIFA World Cup replica. For that reason, he was popular among his peers.

The boy loved soccer, which he played until he was bone-weary. At night, they heard him snoring like a cardiac patient. His idols were Kaká, Christiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. However, to her

understanding, he didn't play like any of the three, but like Samuel Etó-o, the Cameroonian. If his father were dead, then Peza's dream of one day becoming an international soccer star in the European or Spanish League was kaput.

She walked towards the heavy thuds of the mill, all the while reassuring herself she would bear the news with decency and remain composed. She was against breaking down in tears in the mill manager's office. As a God-fearing married woman, she didn't want to tempt Mr Gilchrist Keneas into putting an arm around her in consolation. Such situations often gave birth to adultery.

Around her, though cantankerous, life was equally normal as though no sword swung above her and her son. Women carried water pots and buckets back and forth from their dwellings and an electric motor-driven borehole near the compound. Music blared from a couple of dwellings. If she killed herself, she wouldn't miss anything in a compound where no structure, except for the mill manager's cottage, was a proper house. Most of the constructions were from cut and flattened two-hundred-litre drums, perforated asbestos sheets, poles and homemade clay bricks. Traditional clay huts, the single-walled type, were a majority. The compound resembled a small South African shanty settlement.

Southwards, a locomotive coming from the direction of Bulawayo blew its horns as it approached Sakis Mine. Passenger and goods trains passed less than a hundred metres from the compound. Further east, about one hundred and fifty metres beyond the railway tracks, was Zimbabwe's four hundred-and-sixty-kilometre A5 Highway that linked the capital city of Harare with Bulawayo. Between the two cities lay three smaller cities, Kadoma, Kwekwe and Gweru, all founded on one vast goldfield. Sakis Mine was near the turn-off to Empress Mine, a point twenty-two kilometres from Kadoma, the City of Gold in the north, and thirty-eight kilometres from the industrial city of Kwekwe in the south. A diesel locomotive pulling noisy empty wagons rambled past the compound, its noise

partially drowning the thuds of the gold mill. Matipa didn't even turn to look at it. The passage of trains near the compound was an hourly business.

As she walked, she thought about the disquieting things she heard about her husband. On the eve of the New Year, the satanic prophet described Akar's ways as wicked. She worried about how people would remember her husband.

Matipa walked past the ore-hungry mill, the devil that killed poor Mr Rungano, sucked Akar's sweat and blood, stole his time, checked his performance on the marital bed and gave him pittance in return. She waved and forced a smile at a mill feeder and two lashers on duty that afternoon. One lasher was shovelling ore into a wheelbarrow; the other carted an ore-laden wheelbarrow onto a short concrete ramp leading to the mill. All acknowledged her muted greetings; the feeder and the shovelling man straightened and waved back at her, while the lasher on the ramp just nodded his head and smiled owing to his engaged hands.

In the distant north, the locomotive blew its horns again.

The mine office stood less than fifty metres ahead. Because of her premonition, the office had an apprehensive aura. A tall security fence surrounded the building standing amid eye-catching towering deciduous and coniferous trees. The lawn around the office was olive-green and manicured. It matched the flowery creepers of various shades of green that clung to the walls of the building. Standing in sharp contrast to the bucolic compound dwellings, the building always struck visitors as an elite country lodge. It used to be a farmhouse, but Mr Artaxerxes Korykos turned it into an office and storage building on acquiring the land many years before the Mijas' came to the mine. The owner didn't renovate the sprawling farmhouse in anyway except repaint the walls white and the tiled roof green. Every year he repainted it the same.

Many employees at the mine, having been raised in squalor and now residing in ghetto-like shanks on the premises, weren't

comfortable visiting this office, an iridescent and constant reminder of their poverty and helplessness. As she entered the gate, Matipa couldn't help wondering if employment at this mine wasn't sundry Egyptian slavery.

A whistling gardener in khaki uniform stood on a freestanding ladder pruning the leaves of a luxuriant rhododendron that had surpassed him in height. His back was to her. Various flowers in full bloom, including entirely red and white roses, grew on rockeries and longitudinal beds with borders of bougainvillea and poinsettias in red and yellow. Because of the hunch, the beauty and splendour of the building and its immaculate rockeries assumed the air of a well-tended posh cemetery.

The *déjà vu* hit her again as she looked about, only this time it was stronger and more pronounced. As before, she couldn't recall something trying to come to her mind. The clues were somewhere in the things she was seeing, presenting themselves like riddles. In her bedroom when she looked at the bedspread a vague recollection sprung up and floundered. Looking about, she was sure a hint was before her, yet the clue eluded her. The recollection remained on the periphery of her imagination, suddenly seeming to flicker, suddenly aborting, suddenly almost plain, and suddenly kaleidoscopic. She clicked her tongue in frustration.

As she neared the glassy double doors of the building, she glanced in the direction of the carport when she had cleared a bordering row of hibiscus hedge that obstructed passers-by and visitors from seeing the cars parked at the office. A silver Mercedes S-class Benz and a sleek red Cherokee jeep were in the carport. Her heartbeat surged. The former belonged to Mr Korykos, the latter to the mill manger, Mr Keneas. It wasn't Mr Korykos' custom to be found at the office most of the time, unless it was the end of the month when he had to sign the pay cheque or go through some operational reports. Yet month-end was five days away. The Mercedes shouldn't be at the mine. The Greek was supposed to be in

Harare or hiking in remote mountains along the eastern border of Zimbabwe. Often, it was rumoured, he flew to South Africa for shopping and seaside picnics with his family.

She suspected the two men were waiting for her, confirmation something warranting the proprietor's presence had happened to her husband. Perhaps Mr Korykos wanted to assure her he would foot the funeral bill and assist in the removal of their property from the mine to a destination of her choice. Perhaps his generosity would extend to awarding Peza a bursary for the long schooling years lying ahead of him beginning next year. Generally, people spoke of Mr Korykos as a kind man, but she wondered why he wasn't building proper houses in the compound, or soundly remunerating his employees.

Mr Artaxerxes Korykos is a shrewd capitalist, she answered herself as she walked into the building and stood before the broad desk of the mine's receptionist-cum-clerk, Ivy.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Muja," the receptionist said, looking up at her behind a desktop computer on which she was playing a game simulating bomb blasts and striking bullets. "Mr Korykos and Mr Keneas are expecting you." Her voice lacked its normal enthusiasm associated with her high regard for her position.

Matipa noticed Ivy pretended to look at her eyes when all she did was gaze in the region around her bosom. Indeed Akar was dead; custom forbade people from looking a bereaved person in the eyes. Ivy, who, in her unbridled pride, normally spoke to everyone in accentuated English, was speaking to her in the vernacular.

Like everyone in the compound, she hated Ivy despite her fear of God. Though she was youthful and fluent in English, pimples marred the receptionist's face. She was thin, exceedingly tall, bleary-eyed and ugly, yet she had the vanity of a goddess by virtue of working in the office and rubbing shoulders with Caesar and Herod. People called her *seashell* behind her back. She lived in a flat in the small City of Kadoma and commuted to the mine.

People believed twenty-three years old Ivy was the mill manager's mistress. Workers said she served him tea with eagerness and dressed in revealing clothes to stop him from looking at other women. Her mini-skirt-dominated wardrobe was trendy and almost inexhaustible. Mr Keneas often rode out with her to Kadoma in his Cherokee, purportedly on business. The manager was a wedded man, which made Matipa hate her more.

Matipa thought the receptionist ensnared the mill manager with her ridiculously bulging hips, her only assets. People said she abused certain prescription fattening pills from South Africa now sold on the roadside in many towns. Her hips stuck out like the elbows of a dwarf standing akimbo.

Before Matipa could say anything, Ivy quickly gestured towards an inner door linking the reception with the mill manager's office. Matipa merely nodded, checking herself. She hadn't come to express her hatred of a withered girl. Imperceptibly she drew in a large amount of air, once again steeling herself from the onslaught of an obvious and devastating message awaiting her. She walked towards the closed door, but hobbled slightly. Her armpits suddenly dampened. Certainly, she was edging towards the end of her life. Behind her, Ivy resumed playing the computer game. She knocked thrice on the door, now bidding whatever had to happen to do so quickly, because whatever had to happen God had already bidden in His hallowedness.

"Come in!" Mr Keneas' voice called.

She held the doorknob and tried to turn it, but her hand was slippery with sweat.

"Enter!" the mill manager called again.

She rubbed her palm on her dress, held the knob firmly and turned it.

The door swung open. Her head bowed in humility and respect, she stepped onto the carpeted floor of a spacious office. Mr Gilchrist Keneas sat behind a large executive desk and Mr Artaxerxes Korykos

stooped beside him. Both men were reading a printed document in front of the mill manager. Against the walls, she saw two steel cabinets, a large safe in a corner behind the desk, a waist-high refrigerator and an elegant four-piece leather lounge suite. A large portrait of the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Republic hung on the wall behind the mill manager. Upon seeing her enter, Mr Korykos straightened. Mr Keneas greeted her respectfully and pointed to a visitor's chair.

The proprietor kept neither beard nor moustache. His lips were thin and his forehead receding. Small prodding eyes and an aquiline nose gave him a cunning appearance. Alopecia threatened the thin strip of S-curved black hair growing on his head like a horseshoe. He was close to fifty years old and athletic, probably from mountain hiking, despite a disfiguring nourishment bulge on his belly. Thick veins, almost varicose by appearance, stood out on his arms.

Both men were in T-shirts and cargo pants. Mr Gilchrist Keneas was about ten years the Greek's junior. Sagging muscles from bodybuilding and weightlifting gave the mill manager a mutant physique. They carried pistols tucked in their trousers, which they started carrying a week after the mill incident two years previously. Both men were afraid of Akar.

As she sat, the mill manager enquired after the well-being of their son. She said Peza was all right and in high spirits on the makeshift football pitch. All the while Mr Korykos bored her with his eyes. Silence prevailed for a moment.

"I regret to be the one to break the news to you, Mrs Muja," began Mr Keneas, his eyes downcast on a spot on the desk.

The urge to wail rose in her, but she swallowed hard, countering it.

"But Sakis Mine has now cancelled your husband from its register and payroll. His prolonged absence from work without permission is a deliberate counter-productive habit." He paused and looked up at his employer.

Mr Korykos nodded his concurrence.

She sighed loudly with relief, and to their astonishment, smiled broadly.

Mr Keneas' countenance contorted. "This dismissal is final and irreversible, Mrs Muja," he said, his words issuing in bursts. "Mr Korykos here has come to enforce it as you know your husband has been dismissed numerous times previously. He's been absent from work for more than five working days without our approval or notification. This time he's been absent for eight working days."

"Off the record, we understand your husband is a very dangerous man according to reports that reach us," began Mr Korykos quietly, evidently annoyed by her reaction. "About two years ago, he tried to axe Mr Keneas at the mill. He could've been arrested for attempted murder, but we decided not to go to such lengths against an employee." He stopped to let the words sink. "You're the wife, Mrs Muja, and can convey this message to your husband when he returns."

Matipa resorted to holding her cheeks to prevent herself from giggling.

"Should he attempt to cause havoc or use some bulldog pertinacity to reclaim his job," the Greek erupted, "the security here won't hesitate to shoot him. He's fired." He spoke the last sentence in English, pulling up his sagging trousers over his potbelly. "Be informed when a person pulls the trigger they do so to kill, not to maim. Shooting to maim or disable is Hollywood exaggeration."

Notwithstanding the effort she exerted to abate the smiling, she continued to beam to the dismay of the two men, relief having overtaken her. Akar was alive. Her world, which had suddenly faced a dead end, had found a detour and burst into life again. Words had power both elevating and destructive, she recalled. She deduced Mr Emedhi and Ivy had known about the dismissal, and had perceived it as tantamount to bereavement. Dismissal often invited a hand-to-mouth livelihood, frustration and baseless quarrels in a marriage,

which ultimately led to divorce and death. Men of no certitude perished because of dismissals. Dozens of men dismissed or retrenched without severance packages had hanged themselves on their way home.

Matipa knew Akar didn't believe in limitations and failure. He would live and likely do better outside their accursed employment. She felt like thanking them, but figured they'd not understand and it could fuel their annoyance. Still smiling, she nodded understanding.

"We could apply for a Peace Order against him," went on Mr Korykos. "That option remains at our disposal." He looked down at the mill manager, urging him to speak.

"Though he's dismissed this day the twenty-fifth of November, we remain cognisant of the Law."

She didn't know anything about the Law and didn't care.

"The Law stipulates you can stay in the compound for not more than one month beginning today." From a drawer in his desk, Mr Keneas took out a sealed khaki envelope and handed it to her across the desk. "Here, the letter of dismissal."

Mr Korykos quickly added, "We expect you to leave on or before Christmas Day."

"Thank you very much," she said, the formation of the words finally breaking the smile. She took it they'd associate her gratitude with the gratuitous month, but she was thankful the message wasn't devastating. She took her leave. She had to rush home and bow to God for the relief, and seek His forgiveness in condemning and wishing dead His anointed prophet. In her mind, the prophecy reassumed its potency; someday they would be exceedingly rich. In the reception, Ivy hid behind the monitor of the desktop computer as Matipa passed.

Outside she inhaled fresh air and enjoyed the scent of the flowers borne in it, a scent that had eluded her nostrils upon arrival. A world that had greyed brightened. She told herself after the prayer she

would drag Peza from the football pitch, hug and kiss him on the cheek on behalf of her husband.

However, a rockery adorned with red floribundas and ferns caught her attention, swinging the *déjà vu* again. The terraced flowerbed was to her left and a few metres from the main door. She stopped and studied it. Suddenly the elusive recollection gave way to a total recall. Blooming red roses arranged like the jewels of a kingly crown did it.

Matipa didn't know if she had cause to be sad or to celebrate.

Chapter 6

As the sun went down in the western horizon on 25 November, Binga Jochoma alias Akar Muja arrived at Mupamombe's tomb to offer thanks for the success he had had in the last nine days when he roamed the locality.

Cognisant of God being the Father of all spirits, and of the belief the spirit of Mupamombe, ruler and warrior, was listening to him, foremost, Binga asked God for forgiveness. Whether God was a fallacious figure or great beyond hearing a man's petitions, a small part of his mind persuaded him of the nobility in mentioning God. He observed silence in memory of those who fell by his hand when he was a commando. Many nationalities had fallen by his hand at Pweto near Lake Mweru and at Kananga in the DRC. More than a dozen lay on home ground in the wake of his personal survival efforts, victims of what the politicians and the harsh economy had made him become. Now he was a triumphant and lethal survivor. Mjomba's incisions assured him of excellence.

In all his acts of survival, he was like a hangman performing his office. The condemned couldn't blame the executioner for terminating their lives, and the hangman didn't live in guilt for occupying a necessary office. The man who sent the high voltage or unlatched the trapdoor under the feet of the condemned acted on a High Court judge's ruling. The judge ruled based on the laws made by parliamentarians mandated by their constituencies. The legislators could also pass the blame to the President who authorised every execution, or the people who elected them into office. The hangman was safely a tool in the hands of the State. Because circumstances and disposition propelled him to kill, Binga viewed himself as a hangman.

"Great spirit," he prayed, "protect me from the dangerous charms and amulets my potential rivals wear. Ask God to safeguard my continued prevalence on the goldfield. Grant me longevity." Still

praying, he riveted to the territorial spirit of Mupamombe. After several minutes, he cast snuff on the face of the slope and clapped his hands in supplication, thankful his prayers had sailed through. He believed the spirits identified and empathised with him. Like most of them when they were alive and walked this earth, he was a warrior and a hunter. The spirit owned the minerals underfoot, the game and the forests, and of course, passage to success for whoever sought what was in its territory. The ancestral spirit would take Binga's petitions to God.

Now it was either the bullets of poachers and professional hunters had finished all game, or the animals were fenced up in safaris. However, the hunter's spirit in him remained unfenced and itching for the stalk. These were no longer the days of loincloths and semi-nakedness when impalas and kudus roamed in hordes; therefore, the prey had changed.

At the beginning of the year, he remembered, his wife had tried to entice him with a prophecy and deceive him into converting. He found Matipa's efforts lame, and the prophet manipulative, but guarded his tongue from disparaging the so-called prophet for the sake of peace in the family. He understood his wife could be interchanging the prophet with God, and might find his utterances blasphemous. He couldn't embrace Christianity, a religion he found to be nothing more than a philosophy that seemed to offer hope to invalids, mostly women and a few men scared of death and the hereafter. Death and the hereafter were none of his concern.

By virtue of his lifestyle, Binga was a wanted man. He had been on the police's *Most Wanted* list for many years for several counts of murder. The military police wanted him for deserting the army seven years ago. The army had started its vain search by buying space on the first page of *The Herald*, the country's state-controlled national newspaper, and inserting his military portrait in a public notice.

The portrait was shot upon his recruitment when he was cleanly shaven, youthful and sporting a green military beret. The picture was

a shadow of what he had become. Without the beret, it was almost impossible for the public to identify him. A goatee beard and a Hitler-moustache, brutishly stylish on him, weren't mere style but a furtherance of disguise. The notice stated the paramilitary police wanted him and warned civilians not to approach him because he was a dangerous man. The authorities advised the public to inform their nearest army barrack or police station in the event anyone saw him. They offered no reward.

Akar Muja was a phantom at the Registrar General's Offices in Harare. His zinc ID card was a counterfeit from a backyard office in the capital city. The men who forged them were expert, having genuinely produced the same for the offices of the Registrar General for many years, but eventually forced by slavish remuneration to flee the Civil Service. They gave him the foreign names and a national registration number, which coded him as a foreigner who renounced his alien citizenship to be a Zimbabwean. The police didn't scrutinise such naturalised foreigners or bother them at roadblocks, assuming such citizens had undergone long vetting exercises and found clean by the government; hence the issuance of the zinc ID card.

On the day he met Matipa in Chegutu seven years ago, when the police forced him to alight from an overloaded commuter ominous bus, he had shown the ID to the police details at the roadblock, and satisfied them. He was coming from Harare where he had gone to collect the counterfeit identity card. Back then, he hadn't slain outside duty.

Matipa and Peza had no idea he was once an infantry soldier. Like everyone else at Sakis Mine and all the mines on the vast goldfield, they didn't know he fought in the DRC. People didn't know many things about him. Every time he looked at Matipa and Peza, he pitied them for their ignorance. They lived in fear of the arrival of a prophesied demon, yet they didn't realise he fitted perfectly in the category of dark angels. If ever the so-called demon

in human form would visit Sakis Mine in his presence, Binga would make a public spectacle of this devil.

Through with praying, Binga rose, wore his ankle-high boots and brushed his way to the footpath. So far, the amount of gold he robbed small-scale miners was very little. It could put food on the table, but it wouldn't catapult him to the life he desired. In the west lay Empress Mine, renowned for surpassing its monthly bullion targets. The mine would be his second major port of call on this foray.

Empress Mine was about six kilometres westwards across the forest in a straight line. He trudged through the undergrowth, stooping and at times creeping under tree boughs. Progress demanded endurance. He went round anthills and rock boulders until he reached the footpath from Mjomba's village. He traced it as if he was heading to the diviner's homestead, then began taking westward footpaths as darkness fell. Neither darkness nor being a solitary figure in the forest frightened him. The spirits were with him. On him was the axe. In him was the strength of a bull. Binga Jochoma felt he was now half-human, half-bull.

To occupy himself, he re-lived his escapades. Indigenous miners were more concerned with profits than security, the reason they suffered losses at gunpoint most of the time. A single man could walk into a small-scale gold claim, maim or kill one or two people and walk out with all the gold they had. At times, he didn't shed blood. The miners understood a robbery was underway and gave in without resistance. However, for the miners to know he was dangerous they had to see his savagery first. Consequently, where Binga was known, he could walk in leisurely wielding his small axe, and walk out equally so, but richer in gold and US dollars. Where they professed ignorance of him, he cut heads open like watermelons.

Brutality was the hallmark of the trade. He presented himself and studied the faces of his would-be victims while toying with the axe. On reading ignorance or relaxation, he pounced on whoever was

armed or looked the strongest of them, and butchered him. He could kill a man abruptly. Equally, he knew how to render localised paralysis, temporal or permanent, to a man. He knew the place to strike if he wanted to drench the victim in blood, or cause one to run helter-skelter like a beheaded chicken, and yet remain alive for hours. It all brought fear on the onlookers, and results to him. He spared life as much as possible, but when he felt threatened, he split heads open without the slightest hesitation.

Night fell after he had crossed several streams and dry riverbeds. Industrial noise from Empress Mine became audible. Binga quickened his pace, his muscles vying for action, his nose flaring with anticipation. This would be the first major operation of his prowl since he left Sakis Mine nine days ago.

Approached from the east, one saw Empress Mine almost in its entirety. A broad and flat depression the size of five football fields ridged the establishment. Standing in the bush, he studied the scene below. Floodlights lit the mine at every corner of its perimeter fence. Some of the lights faced away from the mine and lit a vast tree-cleared acreage around the establishment. Rifle-armed security guards were at the mine's entrance, security towers and strategic points. The lights were a new development. The last time he passed near Empress, only a few florescent tubes mounted on standard poles lit it. Several places in and around the mine stood in darkness.

The British and the Americans were cunning, reflected Binga. They invested more in security as if security was the gist of their business.

Through the pair of binoculars, he surveyed the scenario below. A rifle-armed security guard sat in each of the four guard towers around the mine. The main gate stood closed. A guard with a rifle slung on his back smoked as he paced the length of a striped rail-track boon across the entrance. A restless guard dog sat leashed to a post near the gate. Manned exterior guardrooms were on either side of the gate. Inside the fence was a hive of activity. The wheels high

up the headgear were turning. The winch was squeaking. Men in overalls and gumboots stood at conveyor belts and machinery.

A building with many smoke-belching chimneys betrayed itself as the smelting and moulding room. He knew inside the building men poured molten gold into brick trays. One bar of gold was adequate for him to start a clean new life. He couldn't afford to go on killing and maiming. Murder was becoming monotonous to him. Though he felt like he was under a veneer that propelled him to mug, it was high time he stopped the madness. On looking at it squarely, he admitted to himself he had been contemplating burying the axe ever since he embarked on mugging and killing.

Chapter 7

By eight o'clock that evening of 25 November, absurdly the wretched but blessed day of her husband's dismissal, Matipa was already in bed. In the other room, Peza searched through satellite channels in case he might catch glimpses of his favourite international soccer players. She could hear the static hiss of the television set as he went through the channels, and was sincerely thankful to God her son would live.

She was re-living the full recollection. Of a strange dream, she had dreamt the previous night, but its recollection had eluded her up until she issued from the mill manager's office that afternoon and stopped to study the rockery. Only then did she realise she had been battling to remember an eccentric dream.

Of red roses she had dreamt; hence the *déjà vu* from the floral duvet and the flowers adorning the office building. Her knowledge of roses and their husbandry was fair, having worked for two years as a general labourer at Rosebud Garden Centre & Restaurant, a large-scale horticultural enterprise in Chegutu. The two years preceded her meeting Akar and their subsequent customary marriage three months later.

She had dreamt of floribunda roses, not in gardens or adorning a rockery, but evenly planted in Akar's head like a scarlet halo. The plants were twelve, each ornamented with a bloom. In the centre stood a solitary one, the thirteenth. She knew the numbers telepathically. A red bandanna was around Akar's neck in Boy Scout fashion. The thirteen blooms and the bandanna had a striking match. He carried Peza on his back. The boy was goggle-eyed. Akar was weary and staggering. However, his countenance... yes, there was something unnerving about the expression on his face, an expression both jubilant and lamenting.

The dream puzzled her. Red roses were romantic. Yet her husband wasn't passionate. What else besides love and romance could the blooms on his head have signified? She wished Akar and she could enter into a realm of floribundas and lingering kisses. In the back of her mind, she longed for the day she would walk hand-in-hand with her husband though custom forbade the expression of love and romance in public. The society deemed such behaviour moral decadence expected of prostitutes and learned lunatics now aping Europeans in all things western. The men clung to the women instead of the other way round. She hated apes.

The number twelve had a pleasant religious undercurrent. An array of things came to her mind: the twelve tribes of Israel; Jacob's begetting of twelve patriarchs; Solomon's baptismal font, the molten sea that stood upon twelve oxen; the Levite at Gibeah who cut his abused concubine, together with her bones, into twelve parts. At some point, she wasn't sure where and when, the Prophet Elijah picked twelve stones. Then there were the Messiah's twelve disciples. Revelations talked of twelve gates manned by twelve angels. She couldn't recall if the angels stood one at a gate or all the twelve stood at every gate.

The number thirteen unsettled her. On television she had watched in dread Europeans celebrating Halloween's Day. Perhaps she had only seen it in a horrific movie, she wasn't certain. Possibly the central bloom denoted Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. That was a wishful reflection, she presumed. In the garden, like some military strategist, He had ordered the formation of two defensive circles around him. The outer circle had more men than the inner circle consisting of proven swordsmen. Such a formation didn't match the arrangement of the thirteen blooms on Akar's head.

The red bandanna was another puzzle. What did it signify? Akar wasn't a Boy Scout, worse still a member of the US Calvary of the 1840s or an American pioneer Wagoner. Her husband was a pure breed African to the fingertips.

She bombarded herself with numerous questions. Where was he coming from when she saw him in the distance? Why was he carrying Peza on his back, and why was his countenance a contradiction? She chose to speculate. Perhaps upon his return Akar would bring romance to their marriage. The way he touched her was awkward and fell short of the epic smooching she saw in American and European movies. His callous hands brought pain to her sensitive parts. Most of the time she willed him to put his hands at a particular spot, but he always busied himself with her shoulder blades. During the act, he made a lot of noise and often shrieked, usually waking Peza who would knock on the bedroom door enquiring if everything was all right. Only after the actual intimacy, would he touch the right places and attempt foreplay.

She bemoaned the absence of Prophet Jatrophia, the sect's renowned seer. Had he been home, she definitely would've approached him in the compound of the neighbouring farm to demystify the dream, which he could've done freely and effortlessly, and perhaps added forgotten details of other things that featured in the dream. The Man of God had travelled to a village in rural Rusape over three hundred and fifty kilometres away. On a hill called Dandadzi in Rusape laid the remains of the revered founder of the Masowe Apostolic Church, Baba Johannes, the dead man thought to be the reincarnation of John the Baptist. Baba Johannes died in 1973, but prophesying members visited his grave for prayers and the impartation of spiritual power. The prophet had been gone one week.

People of various walks trickled from all the corners of the country to consult the divine oracle that spoke through him. It was rumoured some cabinet ministers, Senators and army generals visited him clandestinely. Lustrous cars, mostly Government Issue to brigadiers, parked at night at the cluster of rustic huts. He should've been an exceedingly rich man, but the oracle was loathsome of his receiving payments or acceptance of gratitude expressed in cash or kind. People expressed their gratitude only through presenting him

with the white flowing garments of the sect, or lengths of material for him to give to a tailor for the sewing of the same. As a result, Prophet Jatrophah was a penniless man.

Matipa greatly appreciated the prophet for not preaching against reading the Holy Bible. Though leaders of the sect throughout the country generally despised perusing the scriptures as a retrogressive act of disbelief in the currency of the Spirit, the prophet widely quoted verses, especially the Old Testament. The Man of God followed biblical precepts. The Holy Book decreed a man had to etch a living by applying himself physically to earn a living. On numerous occasions, he preached Paul made tents when he arrived in Corinth, so that the apostle wouldn't be a burden to fellow believers. The Book was Jatrophah's command.

The thought that worshipping any person's relics or revering them was demonic tormented her for some time. She wondered what power the prophet was after at the tomb of Baba Johannes when already he had the ability to prophesy with precision and could cause immediate healing to those with the right measure of faith.

The various prophecies delivered to the gathering at the sect's year-end vigil were still fresh in her mind. On the night, Christians hid their faces to avoid recognition from fellow Christians who would report them to their pastors. Convectional churches reviled the apostolic faith as pagan and contrary to the teachings of the Holy Bible. Nevertheless, mainstream Christians sneaked to the shrine sporadically, more so at the end of every year, which packed the shrine. Though the pastors adjudged the sect as heathen, they lacked the spiritual gifts people wanted to see in them. On the night, many people turned in large numbers to listen to the prophet. As the bonfire crackled throughout the night, selected men religiously restocking it with logs and cumbersome tree trunks, it was borne in Matipa's mind and heart that Christ was with the sect, edifying and rejuvenating their spirits.

Among the people prophesied in absentia was Mr Evans Emedhi. The prophet saw him hacking people to death with an axe. Though Mr Emedhi was neither apostolic nor Christian, he was a courteous and peaceful man who took no liquor, quarrelled with nobody and kept to himself and his family. Matipa, like most people present, couldn't help mumbling the prophet was bemiring an innocent man and, in the process, beclouding his prophetic reputation. She and others wondered how a man of Mr Emedhi's moral standing could go out of his way to axe another human being. Indeed Prophet Jatropa was an indisputable Man of God, but she felt the devil had breathed error in his visions.

However, eleven months into the New Year, Mr Evans Emedhi hadn't quarrelled with anyone, worse still, stricken anyone with an axe. In fact, from the day he learnt of the prophecy he sought to prove the prophet bogus, which he could only do at the end of the year. Meantime, people noticed he had taken it upon himself to be more courteous to his superiors, workmates and their families. He vowed not to lay his hands on any axe for whatever reason until the end of the year. Now November was ending. Only one month remained to prove the so-called Man of God wrong. As a precaution, sight of the tool became taboo to Emedhi. He gave their household axe to a neighbour for safekeeping. Only his wife, children or visitors cut or split firewood at his dwelling. When they did, the old man took a walk.

The thought that Emedhi would prove the prophet wrong, drove away sleep from Matipa. To soothe her mind and invite sleep, she recalled the day she met her husband. On the day, she finished work at four o'clock and walked out of Rosebud Garden Centre & Restaurant premises. She came across Akar Muja along the Harare-Bulawayo Highway. A team of traffic police officers at a roadblock by the gate had discharged him from an overloaded Bulawayo-bound commuter omnibus. Akar was trying to hike transport. In a matching denim Lee jacket and pair of trousers, and a black Guevara cap, he

had the fused appearance of an admirable music idol and an apt officer in the army.

As fate had it, he was the only one the police ordered to alight for surpassing by one the maximum number of stipulated passengers licensed to travel on the bus. She appeared to mesmerise and hold him in awe. He greeted her in English, a greeting she responded to in the vernacular. He begged her to allow him to accompany her wherever she was going, this despite the heavy travelling bag he carried. She pointed at the bag and laughed. He insisted and walked by her side towards the town centre of Chegutu. At nineteen, it was her habit to remain mute when a man showed romantic interest in her. He prattled about how mesmerising she was, which flattered her. Indirectly he mentioned a romantic void in his life. She didn't utter a word.

By way of introduction, instead of him saying his name was so and so, he said his particulars said he was Akar Muja. He didn't say she was beautiful, but that she was a marvel to behold. In his volunteered brief description of himself, he underlined he was lonely and convinced they hadn't met by chance. By trade, he said he was a freelance entrepreneur, and concluded that he was certain one day they'd kiss before a priest. It all issued from his mouth in perfect English.

Having impressed her with the foreign language, he resorted to the vernacular. She was relieved; lack of proper practice jaundiced her command of English. At Rosebud Garden Centre & Restaurant, everyone, including her British bosses, spoke in the vernacular. Though she couldn't surpass his command of the foreign language, she was more conversant of biblical topics than he was. Her favourite subject at school was Bible Knowledge. It became her pastime after Ordinary Level, which wasn't ill disposed with her Christian life.

Unlike the generality of the men who had proposed to her, Akar wasn't ordinary. There was an exuberance of learnedness about him. Upon learning he was the only one who alighted from the bus, she

believed God had sent them on a collision course. She told him her name. Twenty minutes later, they dined at Mai Reggie Café along the highway. He said her beauty mystified him and he was eager to discover her, constantly looking her in the eyes, punctuating his sentences with staggered descriptions of her being a rarity.

Sometimes he seemed to digress and talk about the Victoria, Niagara and the Iguaçu Falls when in essence he was talking metaphorically about her. It felt good to see a man go to such lengths to win her heart. No one had ever elevated her self-esteem to such eagle heights. She felt worthy and under God's eyes, but she told him to guard against lust and talked about Christ and crucifixion. He was a good listener though he dilly-dallied on converting. Since then he had always declined to convert, arguing lamely he wasn't on a deathbed or an old man. Nonetheless, he gave her hope he would convert and encouraged her to believe in God.

One mouthful of his particularly struck her: "While Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or the *La Joconde* is the most celebrated masterpiece of art in the whole world, you, Matipa, sitting here with me in a humble restaurant in an insignificant town unknown to the world, are about to become the most important thing ever to happen to me."

"What's the *Mona Lisa*? I've heard about it but I don't know what it is."

He smiled. "It's a special Italian painting, my dear, by Da Vinci, of course."

"Tell me about the painting and why you likened me to it."

"The painting is a marvel just like you."

"What's it about?"

"Da Vinci painted a woman with a sly smile on a poplar wood panel. The portrait became the master's finest accomplishment. The *Mona Lisa* is worth about twenty million US dollars."

"Wow! That's a lot of money for a painting. Where's this painting?"

“France’s Musée du Louvre, the most famous art museum in the world. The painting is in the chamber called Salle des Etats where it hangs on a wall behind a special thick protective pane called Plexiglas.”

“You seem to know a lot about the French museum and the *Mona Lisa*.”

“You could say that,” he said with an academic air. “The painting was stolen twice in its history, most recently in 1911, but was recovered two years later. Back then, they used to display it in the Louvre’s Le Salon Carré from which thieves stole it. Now it’s in the Salle des Etats.” He paused to sip his drink. “Art historians say Da Vinci venerated this work and travelled with it everywhere he went. Many professors today argue the masterpiece together with the Italian’s painting of the Last Supper conceals messages and symbols against the Catholic Church.”

She froze and looked at him. “Do you believe that trash?”

“Take it easy, my dear. We’re talking about a painting in France, not my beliefs.”

“Where do you find such information?”

“On the Internet, Madam Matipa, and in books,” he said slightly bowing in mock humility.”

“I don’t burden my mind with such knowledge.”

He smiled. “You’ll forgive me, my dear. It’s only that I find the *Mona Lisa* fascinating and dream of some day laying my hands on it.”

She laughed, nearly choking on her food.

“Well, all I was trying to drive at is that while Da Vinci argued his masterpiece was his transcendent portrayal of feminine beauty, it was a premature judgement because you were yet to be born.”

She touched her bosom. “You flatter me beyond measure, Akar.”

When they finished dining and were set to rise, he reached for her hand and held her lightly. “If I lost you,” he said as if they had been in love for years, “my heart would be lacerated, but wounds, given time, heal. The resultant scars will be a permanent reminder of

a brush with a sapphire stone, dear but lost in chaff for the benefit of societal dregs. The scars would remind me of the hard-heartedness of a woman who refused to have faith in God. I need you in my life, Matipa.”

Her lips quivered. *I need you in my life, Matipa*; she repeated the words inwardly—words laden with blissful meaning. He had talked about Leonardo da Vinci, the *Mona Lisa* and a plethora of things just to reach her heart. She wanted to tell him the same; that she needed him in her life. Lack of experience in romantic matters tongue-tied her ruthlessly. Of course, she wanted to embrace him and make the moment historic in some way, but it was uncustomary to bare her love for him that same day. She would seem like a prostitute, or one accustomed to courtships like most promiscuous urban girls.

Matipa bowed her head. With her free hand, she scribbled on the floral plastic tablecloth like a child. He continued to hold her hand. She continued to scribble.

“Who says you’ll lose me?” she asked in a whisper. Embarrassment befell her when she raised her head and saw they had attracted the attention of a sizeable number of other diners. Effortlessly, he picked his bag with his free hand. They walked out of the café his other hand still holding hers.

Off duty weeks afterwards, their conversations laden with the loungers of marriage, they dined at the trendy Rosebud Garden Centre & Restaurant to the envy of her workmates, irking her employers. They dined frequently at the exclusive restaurant during weekends. One day she reported for work about twenty minutes late. Her line manager expelled her immediately. When Akar visited her after a few days and she told him of her dismissal, he said, “Everything is circumstantial, Matipa.” Whatever that meant, he kissed her on the lips.

That was how she fell in love with the mystery called Akar Muja about seven years ago, she recalled. Three months later, he married her in Mungorwenyi Village in remote Nyanga in the Eastern

Highlands. She had wanted the occasion of her marriage to be memorable, but being a customary law union in a rural setup, the opposite happened.

On the day they married, Akar brought his father as a witness. He parted with a large sum of money, which roused discomfort from his in-laws. A suitor was supposed to marry in phases and not bring down the total amount demanded. Though large amounts of money and live cattle exchanged hands, a marriage wasn't a business transaction of any sort. People believed a bride price settled at once doomed a marriage by scorning culture and displeasing the ancestral spirits. Despite the generous amount he parted with before the in-laws stopped him from paying more, he remained with an equally large amount on his person. When they were alone, he smiled and bragged money was like the leaves of the cork tree to him.

Jesus! Matipa presently shook her head like one coming to. *Why am I reliving things that happened seven years go?* Her mind reverted to the recollection of the dream of the previous night.

Chapter 8

Binga was determined to change his livelihood. He saw himself in the near future casting the axe into a tumultuous river. If the river failed to carry the axe to the Indian Ocean, at least it would dispose of its spirit. As he looked at Empress Mine below, the thought that he was on the brink of wealth motivated him. He studied the mine, hoping beyond reality he could find a way in and lay his hands on ingots.

However, the odds weighed heavily against him. Though he felt he could tear several men apart with his bare hands, he wasn't bulletproof. Binga frowned and clicked his tongue several times in anger and frustration. The security was a deathblow to his plans. The pangs of missed opportunities were starting to sting him when he shifted his gaze to the left where the mine's compound lay less than half a kilometre away. Grocers' shops lined a broad gravel road passing through the mine. The Gokwe-Kadoma road was ever busy with commuter omnibuses and haulage trucks, the latter ferrying coal from Gokwe Colliery. He would go there and catch a bus home. After all, he had enough gold to rouse a pleasant welcome.

He skirted the lit area and came to the shops. At the retail centre though he walked and whistled casually, he was cautious not to mingle with the public in case he might bump into one of his recent victims and a fracas could ensue. He wasn't a street fighter. He deplored fighting for no reward, especially when the object of the fight was already on his person. The majority of the people at the shops were drinking, noisy prostitutes. Assuming no one present carried a firearm, he would pray for time to stand still in order to route the scores of people in the area, should the community clamour for his blood.

Matipa and Peza weighed heavily on his mind when he went to stand by the unlit side of the road. He had never missed them so

terribly all his life. He suspected Matipa was doing some tricks with her apostolic prayers. If she were calling him home through prayer, it would be an unmanly weakness on his part to respond favourably.

When an old, roaring convectional bus carrying farm produce pulled to a stop, hurling plumes of dust on him, he boarded and bought a ticket to Kadoma, which meant he was bypassing Sakis Mine. His wristwatch read 7:45 pm. He was the only one who bounded the bus. Tired and sleepy rural people in woollen hats were aboard. He speculated they were travelling from remote Gokwe to sell the produce in Kadoma.

Because there were no standing passengers, Binga guessed they were chances he could find a seat and walked towards the back of the bus. He was lucky enough to find one, seemingly the only one left, on the same seat as a suckling mother whose baby was falling asleep. Suddenly the child opened its eyes wide, stared at him and began to cry with its eyes on him as though he were an apparition.

Binga tried to look out the closed window nonchalantly, but only saw a reflection of his face in the pane owing to the darkness outside. The juju marks on his brow caught his attention. For the past nine days he had only felt them with his hands, now he had opportunity to see them. The cuts were ugly and conspicuous. From their symmetry, position and the apparent dark ground juju stuffed in them, an observer could tell they weren't ordinary injuries. He turned away from the window and bowed his head in feigned occupation.

Other babies began to cry too, the noise rising to an irritating orchestra. Elderly passengers looked about and blindly cursed people who used evil medicine. Nevertheless, the bus was already in motion. Not long after, and now crying more like the rest of the babies, the one beside Binga started to perspire. He glanced at the child. She was losing breath and stiffening, grasping for air dangerously and critically sliding towards death. The mother panicked and stood up, the yelling child in her hands. Numbed by fear, she looked helplessly at the child, glanced quizzically at Binga and appealed silently for assistance

from the other passengers, tears welling in her eyes. The appeal was brief and desperate. Inquisitive passengers juttied up from their seats and asked what had gone wrong.

Binga fidgeted with his pockets and, in a ploy, gapped his mouth. He rose and walked down the aisle to the door. Questioning and astounded eyes followed him until he stood near the conductor. He knew he had to remain composed and appear as indifferent as possible. However, if someone had the audacity to accuse him of practising witchcraft, certainly he would hack people to death, especially those near him, for the sake of order and control. Then there'd be no other option but to hijack the bus, rob everyone on board, strip them naked and burn their clothes and luggage. Naked and stranded, it would take the bus crew and passengers ages to find help or reach the police.

The crying intensified, forcing the driver to look over his shoulder. With an open-palm gesture, he sought to understand the meaning of the disturbance. He was an elderly man in a pastoral straw hat suitable for an afternoon stroll in a derelict village. The conductor gestured ignorance and shrugged. All along, the youthful conductor had worn a permanent sneer, his calculated defence against problematic passengers.

"Drop me at the next bus stop," Binga ordered the conductor. "I forgot something important."

"There won't be any refund," the conductor said, staring at the marks on his forehead.

"There won't be bloodshed. That's the good thing."

Taken aback by the statement, the conductor whistled to the driver. As the conductor stepped aside, Binga read fear in the conductor's face. The driver looked over his shoulder again and gestured bewilderment. Whistling akin to a herd boy commanding ploughing oxen to halt, the conductor shrieked the bus to a stop amid blustering revs. Binga alighted. Plumes of dust and darkness

enveloped him. The bus drove away and became a fading hum out of sight in the distance.

Either side of the road it was forest. Binga walked in the direction of the bus and found himself whistling Mjomba's tunes. Not far behind him was Empress Mine; he could tell from faint, familiar noises from the plant. Actually, he was still on the widespread premises of the mine whose property sprawled in all directions.

Binga was still full of vigour. Though the cries had slightly embarrassed him, he wasn't the least a disconcerted man. In fact, he had cause to celebrate. The cries were neither ordinary nor coincidental, but were confirmation he had gone beyond being a self-possessed man to a spirited hunter. Hunting and spirit possession couldn't be dissociated. Mjomba's homestead was about two kilometres ahead. It wasn't like him to go courtesy calling. The *n'anga* dissuaded him from visiting him except when he wanted to pay tribute. It appeared his initial visit to the diviner was a good investment.

Occasionally haulage trucks sounded in the distance behind him. The trucks lit him with their bright beams, but none stopped when he stretched his hand. He came to the bus stop for Mjomba's village and walked on, whistling the more. The village was already asleep, perhaps the diviner too. He walked on for about twenty kilometres, coming short of Sakis Mine by approximately another twenty kilometres. Then he decided to bivouac in the forest. Even if he had come to Sakis Mine, he wouldn't have diverted to it to spend the night at home. He was on the prowl. According to the advice of juju masters, the sexual act would defile him.

He found a spot about a hundred metres from the road on a low fell in a grassy area surrounded by shrubs. Here he would sleep until dawn, then try to hike transport to take him to Kadoma when truck drivers were less likely to think he was a robber posing as a traveller. His plans for the next day were clear-cut. According to his *modus operandi*, in Kadoma he would buy new clothes and discard by fire

the clothes he was wearing. Changing clothes shielded him from instant recognition. From the small city, he would hitchhike about eighteen kilometres to Patchway Mine. As he picked small stones from the spot, the Patchway Mine mission preoccupied him. The large-scale mine used to be very productive, but it was now defunct and infested with illegal miners.

Crouching, Binga placed both palms on the ground and remained motionless for a while, his attention to his hands. He moved backward and placed his palms in two other places. No ant walked onto his hands. He was hopeful on the spot he wouldn't be prey to creepy insects or an army of ants. From bushes and young trees nearby, he cut some verdant twigs and made a bed on the ground, around which he cast snuff as a fumigant.

He lay on the bed and thought of Nomathemba, Matipa, Peza and Gillian. For the sake of the four, he was bivouacking. For them he would do anything. He missed Peza. Binga saw traits of a persevering achiever in the boy. By idolising international soccer players, Binga took it his son admired excellence and would excel accordingly.

He named him after the second highest mountain in his rural home of Chimanimani. Binga was the name of the highest mountain on the same range. In the two mountains were alcoves, caves and grooves housing great territorial spirits. Their peaks were granite monuments crowned with halos of mist, which drifted perpetually from one mountain to the other, and vice versa.

Chapter 9

Matipa was falling asleep when a knock came on the main door. Her heart leapt with joy. No one from the compound visited anyone at that hour unless there was something terribly wrong, usually an illness or death. Chances were it was no one else but Akar.

She would furnish him with the dismissal letter and coax him to forget about Mr Korykos and Keneas and the unrewarding employment. From the men's demeanour and emphasis, surely they were determined to shoot him dead at the slightest provocation. He was likely to differ, preferring to contest the dismissal physically. A reminder of their prophecy of prosperity would contain him. They weren't to linger too long in the compound as if vagrancy threatened them. If possible, tomorrow they'd leave with their belongings. The world was bigger than Sakis Mine was. Someday he would dig and continue digging until they were rich. The words Jatrophia spoke were spirit and life.

She sat up in bed expecting Peza to enquire from the knocker, only then did she realise the boy had switched off the television set and was snoring loud enough to scare owls. Because November was sweltering hot, she slept in the nude. Matipa put on the white dress draped on the backrest of a wooden chair and left the bedroom. In the lounge-cum-kitchen, Peza was fast asleep on the floor. The naked bulb in the room was on. As her foot landed on the edge of his bedding to enable her step over him, the knock came again. She told herself that though her husband had been stricken off the payroll, the day remained special. She would surprise him with a passionate kiss and a hug, and boldly pronounce her love for him.

In the past, she planned something romantic for his reception, but at the last minute, she chickened and greeted him with a handshake as if he were some distant rural relative visiting. Initially

she was convinced an evil spirit on her part forbade her to express love to her husband. However, with time she concluded she had a fear of her husband.

She unlatched the door and pulled it open. Her heart sank immediately, and despite herself, her face contorted. Outside stood the prophet's acolyte, *Madzibaba* Remegio. The teenager was in a white toga-like garment complete with a lengthy shawl flung over his right shoulder. He clasped his hands prayerfully and tilted his cleanly shaven head shining under a cloud-free starry sky. Shades in his temples and an angular jaw testified of his abandoning himself to prolonged fasting.

"The peace of God dwell with you," Remegio said a little loudly, like one advanced in years and knowledge. "May His peace reside in this house. May His blessings grace your family and endeavours."

"May it dwell with you too." She forced a smile.

"The prophet has returned from Dandadzi." Urgency and authority were in his voice. "He invites you to the shrine. It would be wise of you to come immediately."

Sadness saddled her; this was a summons. It was essential she consulted the prophet at her leisure. Believers summoned to the shrine often went there to receive terrible prophecies.

"It'll take me some minutes to prepare." She vanished into the house and emerged in her flowing garments and a headscarf that swept the ground, and fully girded in underclothes.

After she padlocked the door, the two took the northward direction for the shrine. They cleared the compound and walked on a footpath parallel to the railway line, the thuds of the mill fading behind them. The acolyte walked ahead, head held high, never looking back or side-wards. When the patchy grassland of bushes around the compound gave way to tall thickets and the footpath curved westward, taking them away from the railway line into the woods, he broke into a song inviting the guidance of the Archangel Gabriel and the protection of Michael. Ahead of them was the

common graveyard for the mining and farming communities in the area.

At night, apparitions were a common sight around the cemetery. Their fires flared into the sky and broke into glowing smithereens that rained to the ground regrouping as they did so. At times people saw tall, continuously elongating figures that towered above the clouds. Some of the ghosts were violent and clapped passers-by. The less dramatic were the type that only glowed like cigarette fires and vanished at the approach of people. Some were rumoured to follow people and take residence in them for any length of time they wished, causing hysteria and hallucination in their victims. Though she was familiar with the tales and had never seen a ghost, she joined the acolyte in his invitation of the archangels. As a right-hand man of a great prophet, perhaps he was seeing something in the spirit.

Remegio was a school dropout. He left school the previous year to serve the prophet, a display of faith that earned him much respect from the elders of the church. Remotely commenting on his deserting school, Prophet Jatropa had told the congregants at the sect's shrine in the hills that faith, in its simplest definition, was obedience. He added that heavenly medals awaited sacrificial people like the patriarch Abraham, the Prophet Daniel and *Madzibaba* Remegio in Heaven. Beyond that, he uttered nothing.

By now, Remegio should've been sitting for the final Ordinary Level examination. However, he had hearkened to the Spirit to serve the prophet and the congregants better. It implied Remegio was now bearing the invisible Ark of the Covenant together with Prophet Jatropa and the sect's twelve elders while the tribes of Israel, the ordinary members, trailed. However, his father, an underground miner, and stepmother, both drunkards and non-believers, partially disowned Remegio for dropping out of school.

Because the couple had no other children besides the teenager, the Chipendos, Remegio's parents, deemed themselves childless from the day they ostracised him. Nevertheless, they continued to stay with

Remegio and cater for his needs after Mr Keneas gave them a lecture on children's rights. The couple gave Remegio until the end of the year to move out of their house and perish alone out of their sight. His father, Boniface Chipendo, a man known to consult *n'angas* near and far, sounded certain the apostolic faith would kill his son, or had already killed him. The Chipendos were in the habit of telling whoever cared to listen that Remegio had forfeited his future and that the apostolic faith was his undoing. They told people the faith and Prophet Jatropha were the Devil's gifts to Sakis Mine. Despite herself, Matipa hated the Chipendos. Regarding their utterances as blasphemous, she had no kind thoughts or words for them.

Matipa and Remegio walked along the periphery of the unfenced graveyard, a small acreage defaced by cairns, mounds of earth and crude crosses and rock headstones. The majority of the graves were unmarked. Sparse trees and shrubs cast frightening shadows on the ground in the star-lit night.

A sudden noise in the centre of the graveyard sent a sharp chill down Matipa's spine. Immediately the receding noise of something hitting and brushing against bushes followed. She concluded it was a startled animal, probably a hare, fleeing. The acolyte briefly looked in the direction of the noise and heightened his singing to a near frenzy. Closing the distance between them to a pace, she followed suit, her shaky voice betraying her fear. They passed the graveyard without further incident. Remegio slowly killed the song and began another one in low tones. The song assured them of the company of Baba Johannes all the time. She sang along with him, falling back a few paces. Rodents scuttled from the footpath at their approach. To their left, a few metres ahead, stood a concrete obelisk on the side of the footpath. It marked the site of the permanent entombing of eighteen illegal miners.

The sad story behind the laying of the obelisk was common knowledge. A year ago, eighteen men descended into a disused fifty-metre deep shaft at the site and left a sentinel on the surface. The

mine authorities had halted operations down the shaft due to yawning faulting cracks on the walls of its tunnels. On the night, whatever had held the rocks in place gave in and entombed the eighteen. The sentinel ran to the mill for help, and vanished into the night after giving details.

All professional rescue efforts from established mines, including Venice and Empress Mine, and other platinum and gold conglomerates far afield failed. Rescuers used a caterpillar to open into a wide berth the initial six metres of the shaft. When they studied the rock profile, some pointed out the cracks and faults were too wide and close to warrant any risk taking. For three days, onlookers came to gather at the site hopeful that the deliberation of the rescuers would at least lead to the recovery of eighteen corpses. However, the whole operation culminated in the erection of the obelisk a month later by a team of builders from the Ministry of Public Construction. The Provincial Governor of the area commissioned the monument. Journalists recorded proceedings.

The following evening the Governor was on national television, the obelisk erect in his background. With words, he scolded would-be illegal gold miners and warned them to keep away from private properties. Mr Korykos was by his side nodding. The politician passed token condolences to the bereaved families gathered at the site for a chance to perform burial rites. The Governor didn't mention a soaring rate of unemployment, crippling wages and the general closure of companies; culprits understood to have driven the men to risk their lives. Ever since, people believed eighteen vicious ghosts haunted the vicinity of the obelisk.

Again, Matipa and Remegio passed the site without incident, but her heart went to the Chile's "Los 33", the thirty-two Chilean miners and a Bolivian miner trapped underground in 2010 for sixty-nine days in the San José Mine. Everyone's life had its darkest instances, she thought, prayerfully wishing God would spare her from such disasters in all their assorted forms. Through modern technology, the

world had seen, fed and assured the thirty-three of rescue. Unlike the eighteen under the obelisk, the thirty-three miners benefitted from a massive international response from as far afield as Australia and Canada. She wondered if the rich countries would've reacted with the same concern and swiftness if the eighteen were in an enclosure like the Chileans and the Bolivian. Complications of an undeclared trade embargo against the country would've hampered the shipping of the massive drill to Zimbabwe, or Somali pirates would've seized the ship with the massive drill.

Because Remegio and she met with no incident, it reinforced her belief in the constant company of the late founder of their sect. She added fervour to her voice.

A couple of metres beyond the obelisk Mr Korykos' property ended. The density of the trees and the foliage thinned as the perceived dominion of ghosts ended. The sound of the mill was now a dull thud. The noise of haulage trucks on the Harare-Bulawayo highway waned to almost imperceptible levels. Here the Kingdom of God seemed to begin on earth. On a hill ahead was the shrine. However, an open sod dotted with tall saguaro-like cacti stretched between them and their destination. They were now on the plain of the demons cast from new converts at the shrine. Sect members believed the demons Prophet Jatropha cast from possessed people came to settle in the desert-like plain and became whirlwinds.

Ahead, a whirlwind swished and raced towards them. Matipa clenched her left hand and pointed at it with her smallest finger. The wind whooshed towards them building into a formidable force, but, still pointing, she willed it to head in the other direction. It swerved to the side and fizzled suddenly, scuttling leaves. They broke the leaves underfoot while absorbed in a song in honour of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

From the compound to the shrine, it took them about twenty minutes. The shrine was a bare acreage on the windward side of a gentle slope. Beyond the hills was a plain of sleepy villages and

plough-lands of scattered plots of maize, cotton and wheat seized from a commercial white farmer. Most members of the sect jointly displaced the once-flourishing commercial farmer to accord themselves settlement. Now pathetic subsistence farming prevailed, but Matipa was certain God was on the side of the Africans in their struggle for equality and prosperity. One day God would bring them all the fertilizer and implements they needed and, commercial farming now talked about in the past tense and in hushed tones, would flourish again.

Other times she thought God was on the side of the Europeans. After the expulsion of white farmers, rain had stopped falling. Instead, political chaos, food shortages and uncertainty reigned across the country. It seemed to make sense that this God brought to them by the ancestors of British parliamentarians and lords had an English bias. However, who would deliver pieties on fairness and equitable land distribution to the Almighty? Such blasphemous contests soured her.

Matipa scanned the shrine. Nothing was eye-catching about the place of worship. Clay pots the size of small dinner bowls or two cupped hands were the only items in the shrine. The handful vessels were at the centre. Some of the containers were on the edge of the shrine. Others were in reeds planted in clusters on the periphery. The plants were in commemoration of Moses and the exodus, a reminder life was a journey.

Remegio stopped, turned and, clasping his hands in reverence, slightly bowed to Matipa, indicating that here they had to part ways. He turned again, crossed himself thrice to sanctify himself in case he had picked evil spirits along the way, and stepped on the sacred ground.

She noticed he came to fetch her barefoot, a habit of many believers. No one stepped on the shrine wearing shoes. The teenager walked towards a small group of men sitting in a semi-circle on the ground their knees propped up, their shepherd crooks resting on

their right shoulders. She recognised the tall figure of an erect man dressed in their similitude. The tall, wasted man addressing the group of men was Prophet Jatropa.

She remembered Prophet Jatropa had called for the sect's twelve elders to convene at the shrine for an all-night tutorial on matters spiritual. He called for this meeting on the day he left for Dandadzi, asking the generality of the believers not to attend. Being a Thursday, *Jesteni*, the sect's members normally came to the shrine to spend the night in songs and prayer, summoning angels and iconoclastic Old Testament prophets to attend the main service the following day.

Southward was a holding clearing for all things impermissible on the shrine; shoes, wristwatch, bangles, bags, condoms... the list was endless. Men had theirs to the north. As she bent and removed her shoes, she could hear the prophet as he spoke in a high voice. The wind blew in her direction, bringing all his words to her.

"With Baba Johannes's blessings, I urge you to renounce bachelorhood and marry." His voice was quarrelsome and sermonic. "I don't urge you towards the white man's marriage which is earthly, lost and founded on economics. I pray you abide in the peace of the Lord."

"Amen!" the group responded.

"Economics erupted from mean businessmen who erupted directly from a greedy world emanating directly from the Devil. A man married to one wife is on the threshold of marriage. To love and to behold is to be husband to many, which is a blessing we must cherish as Abraham's children. From whom do you learn your lessons?" He paused. "Do your lessons come from elected governors and senators of this land, or from the history of the Chosen?" Again, he paused, seemingly for a response. "Elders, I find you fascinating. *Fascinating* is a word I use to describe people who cannot learn. Your inability to learn neither astounds the Spirit nor surprises a thinking

mind. History tells us even historians have failed to learn from history. May the peace of our Lord dwell with you, elders.”

“Amen!” the elders shouted in unison.

For perusing the Bible and quoting its verses, lengthy paragraphs thereof, Matipa was proud of Prophet Jatrophia. Other sects saw no logic in reading the Book when God could speak to them directly. Conservative sects were of the opinion God wasn’t concerned about what happened in Macedonia, Galatia, or Caesarea, old history, but the present. He showered His people with current blessings. Indeed, Moses stretched his hand over the Red Sea and parted it. However, inasmuch as she believed in the miracle, it was clear to her God wanted Moses and the Israelites to have a testimony. She understood her testimony was in the offing in the form of the wealth prophesied.

Matipa believed. According to the sect, to believe meant accepting God didn’t belong to the archaic archives of history. His power and influence were as current as the electricity powering the gold mill. For this reason, she had left her contemporaneous church in Chegutu, a congregation that sang wonderfully and spoke in innumerable tongues, but couldn’t prophesy or issue a simple stone or a leaf to a person as their sole travel *document* to South Africa or the United Kingdom.

It appeared the prophet had gone to Dandadzi to plead with the relics of Baba Johannes for sanction to re-route the sect to its biblical blessings. With pebbles and holy water, he delivered people from joblessness, hostility in marriage, dejection and evil. However, from what she saw on some Christian channels on TV, the prophet was yet to mend broken bones and declare healing to cancerous wounds. She hoped God would take him to such admirable heights.

Many years ago, perhaps when she was in primary school, people said the Spirit led him into a field of jatrophia to fast and meditate for six days and six nights. This he did in the crop of a commercial farmer and shuffled out of it skeletal and prophesying. Jatrophia was an earned sobriquet, which stuck on him like a navel.

“The Spirit gave us sanction to lay our hands on the Bible and on people, to cast demons and silence false prophets. Go not after gods. The root of humility lies in a man keeping himself far away from the honour accorded cabinet ministers, prime ministers and presidents. May the peace of the Lord abide in you, elders.”

“Amen!”

She took off her shoes. Sentient she couldn’t approach an exclusive group of men; she sat on a rock and awaited further instruction. However, the acolyte humbly sat at the prophet’s feet.

“From this hill a new apostolic sect shall spring forth. The task of naming this offshoot lies with you, elders. Peace! Peace! Make the promises of God your habitation, elders!”

“Amen!”

Several minutes passed as the elders deliberated, wild suggestions rising above other voices. Finally, one suggested *Jatropha Apostolic Faith* to applause and immediate silence. The towering figure further suggested they had to sleep on it and invite the Spirit in their imagination. The group broke into a song that called on Miriam to ferry them to the other shore:

Miriam, *tiyambutsel!*

(Miriam, ferry us to the other bank)

When it died, the prophet continued.

“A weighty sign of humility is that a man should speak highly of his neighbour instead of himself. The Book says, “*Let another man praise thee, not thy own mouth.*” Peace! Peace! May the peace of the Lord abide in you, elders!”

“Amen!” they responded in one voice.

“Isaiah, speaking seven hundred years before the coming of the Messiah said: He who would come would delight in the fear of the Lord!” He was now speaking on top of his voice as though multitudes packed the place. “An elder ought to remain subtle in the

fear of God! Never be found guilty of forgetting the will of the Creator! God forbids men to gaze at women! Thy eyes mustn't see women but the King in His beauty! Peace! Peace! The peace that lingers forever be with you, elders!"

"Amen!" moved by the message, Matipa chorused with the elders in response.

"The constitution of saintliness lies in going beyond the letter of the law. Be gracious in all your works! A man can prophesy and have all the honour on earth, but cannot attain sainthood until God declares to him, *'Thou art my son, a God-fearing man.'* David played the harp in pursuance of the verse, *'Let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord!'* The more one opens one's mouth, the greater the likelihood of sinning! All your good deeds carry them out in secret. The Book says, *'If thou be righteous thou doest for Him.'* Peace! Peace! The peace that endures forever be with you, elders!"

"Amen!" The chorus grew louder, her voice swallowed in it.

"As the Spirit empowered Peter and James to heal with their hands, their handkerchiefs and their shadows, in a surpassing fashion it shall ordain you!" Tongues took over and he spoke them rapidly, the words Philippi, Corinth, Cappadocia, Ethiopia and Antioch sticking out occasionally.

Madzibaba Remegio sang laconically that they were now walking endowed with miraculous power as the saints did in Galilee. The elders joined him with fervent resignation:

Garariya tave-kufa-a-mba

Garariya tave-kufa-a-mba

Garariya ye-ye-ye!

The intermingling song and the tongues died together after a long while. The prophet resumed quoting from the Holy Bible as if it was open before him.

The discomfort of the rock Matipa sat on held sleep at bay for her for some time. However, the preaching and the singing displaced each other endlessly until she lost track of time. Then she began to doze. She estimated it had gone on like that for about four to five hours, until deep sleep overruled all her resistance. She lay on the ground as the prophet mechanically recited the Ten Commandments verbatim.

Chapter 10

Lying at the shrine, Matipa dreamt of a large crowned eagle.

It dived from a vermillion sky and snatched Peza. He was in his infancy and lying in the shade of a tree outside their house. She was in the lounge and saw the entire incident through the main door. She came out running and screaming, but the eagle and the infant were already airborne and ascending. Peza was frighteningly limp. She refused to accept he was dead. The eagle and the boy diminished into a dot. Blood spatters were on the blanket on which the baby lay. The occurrence demanded no further interpretation; the eagle had killed the child with its talons. If he weren't yet dead, its lethal grasp would definitely kill him. If, after soaring to the clouds he remained alive, the predatory bird would drop him over a rocky fell. As soon as he crushed on the rocks, it would tumble and snatch him again. His death was a foregone conclusion.

Matipa collapsed into a bottomless realm of perpetual falling. Hours metamorphosed into days, which turned into weeks. She kept falling. The walls of the pit-like realm were pitch-black. Eventually she landed on the threshold of their house without injury or knowledge of where she had come from. Everything around her was as authentic as it was in real life and the compound was anomalous as ever. However, everyone was indoors. The inactivity on the playground was conspicuous. Was there a curfew at Sakis Mine?

She thought of Peza and feared for him. Though no soldiers or police officers were in sight to enforce the possible curfew the atmosphere suggested, she felt vulnerable in the open and wondered how she could put herself under house arrest when she didn't know where her son was.

Something in the distance caught her attention. It was a solitary man trudging towards the compound from the woods. His height, gaiety, broad shoulders and dark complexion were familiar. The approaching man was Akar Muja. Twelve floribundas grew in his head like a scarlet halo. A thirteenth one grew in the centre of his head. Around his neck was a red bandanna. Gawking six-year old Peza was on her husband's back. Akar's countenance was a pudding

of equal recipes from Hell and Heaven. She ran to Akar and Peza. Only then did she realise she was naked.

A hand grabbed her shoulder as she was running to her husband. It shook her awake. Matipa woke up with a start and stared into *Madzibaba* Remegio's face.

In the east, day was breaking, casting a faint purplish half-crown on the Great Dyke, distant mountains. On the shrine, the group of men still sat where she had found them. The prophet was speaking in tongues standing tall on the exact spot he had stood on her arrival. The elders were quietly singing a repetitious song.

"The Spirit now sanctions you to present yourself before Him." The acolyte straightened and clasped his hands.

"Praise God," she said, rising from the dust and yawning.

"Pray ancestral demons from your family don't blur his visions."

"He's a Man of God."

The teenager led her to the men.

Matipa was glad she had put on a brassiere and a pair of panties; the prophet saw everything, and could've seen her nakedness through her gown. He wasn't going to reprimand her for failing to gird her loins in keeping with a statute of the Old Testament. How could a Man of God who could tell if a girl was a virgin or not, for the restoration of virginity, fail to see the nakedness inside her garments?

She noticed red ochre soiled the seat of his garment, which made her check herself and try to beat the dirt out of her own. However, red ochre on a white garment was stubborn dirt.

Remegio headed for the right-hand side of the prophet while she knelt a respectable distance from the men. Like the prophet, she faced the rising sun. Usually prophecies delivered at sunrise gave impetus to a believer, she recalled, as she looked at the faces of the sitting men and counted them quietly. They were the twelve elders singularly drawn from the twelve settlements within a rough radius of ten kilometres from the shrine. In their midst sat *Madzibaba* Tinashe

from Sakis Mine. All of them were over fifty years old, clean-shaven and heavily bearded. The prophet was in his mid-forties and towered above the men as the epitaph-free obelisk at Sakis Mine did over shrubs.

“Your husband is alive and well,” the prophet began. He was behind her to her right.

Matipa smiled.

“He’s in one piece though he exiled himself from light,” he went on. “By appearance, God cut him from the same silk as the Devil.” He paused and inhaled loudly then began to speak vociferously. “In a few days, a demon of impeccable manners shall come looking for your husband. I repeat this in the hearing of the council of elders: A demon of impeccable manners shall come looking for your husband, *Madzimai* Matipa. Your husband must be home to meet the demon. You shall recognise the demon by his good manners and the plumage of the raven, which is his clothing. The claws of the eagle are his grip.”

The words *claws of the eagle* sent shivers in her body. She turned and looked at the prophet for a garrison against what was to come.

He looked at the blinding tropical sun without squinting and then at her. “Of Enoch, God dictated word by word to Moses: *Enoch walked with God and was not.*” He stopped.

She suspected he was allowing the scripture to sink.

“As if not to be outdone, this fiend walks with the Devil and he shall be not. The Devil shows his pleasure to those who please him by displeasing them. I cannot tell you more. You’re spiritual toddlers who fear for the flesh.” He turned to the twelve elders. “To Elder Tinashe the Spirit says I should pose a question.”

Madzibaba Tinashe knelt. “Amen.”

“For a man to sustain the life in him, how many lungs does he need?”

The elder remained mum for a long while, thinking. “Two, my lord,” he answered hesitantly. “A person can do with one in an emergency or illness.”

“Beware the demon spits venom and shoots quills. Its urine is inflammable. *Madzibaba* Tinashe, from it put the same distance a saint would put between himself and a brothel. From Adam’s ribcage, God drew a bone and made Eve. Let no one use something of such creative value to take the other’s life. This is my message to you, *Madzibaba* Tinashe. You may sit down.”

The elder crossed himself thrice and sat, the relaxed smile she had seen on his face since daybreak gone. The prophet focused his gaze on Matipa.

“My lord,” she began, “how do I protect myself from the coming demon... his venom and his quills?”

“*Madzimai* Matipa, if a dying buffalo staggers in your direction, you can only move out of its way to avoid injury.” He shook his head stoically and made a few grunts. “You can recite all the Psalms, but if you don’t want the sight of blood don’t go to a beheading. If a beheaded man staggers in your direction, take your leave to avoid sight of his blood. But I shall pray for the Archangel Michael to stand bodyguard over your family.”

He crossed over to lay his hands on her.

Matipa closed her eyes, but she wasn’t convinced the prayer would work. She preferred to receive a piece of sanctified stone to place in her bath and carry about on her person. However, Prophet Jatropa had long said the days of the pebble were numbered.

“You bear a letter,” the prophet said.

He was right. She had tucked the dismissal letter inside her gown.

“Eleven being the number of disciples who didn’t betray Christ, the eleventh word in the first sentence is *dismissed*. Object if the Spirit lies.”

She had read the letter so many times that she could recite it, especially the first devilish sentence. It came to her mind: *This letter*

serves to inform you that the management has dismissed you with immediate effect from the employ of Sakis Mine. She counted the words off her fingers one by one.

“Amen,” she said, confirming the prophecy was accurate.

“Amen!” the elders shouted, marvelling at the precision and the mysticism.

“The storm that’ll come shall engulf this shrine, Sakis Mine and the farming community in the area.” Abruptly, alliterate rhyming tongues took over his speech. Shortly, he sang the tongues flawlessly.

No one joined the singing. The prophet forbade anyone from singing or uttering spiritual words or tongues he pronounced, for no one could tell from which one of the nine heavens the prophet had entered. In the distant mountains, the sun broke from the horizon, its rising assuring Matipa of a blessed new beginning. The prophet sang for about two minutes, but it seemed like eternity to anxious Matipa.

“That letter is your blessing. If I were you, I’d leave Sakis forthwith for the blessing to hold. I say this in the hearing of the twelve elders.”

Chapter 11

At midnight on 26 November, Binga was at Patchway Mine set to descend to a peculiar world.

He vied for brawls to test Mjomba's juju. Within six months, he guessed, he would be the proud owner of a mansion by any standard. On its walls would hang original paintings by Van Gogh, Picasso and Dali, while human-size sculptures by renowned sculptors would stand in its gardens.

Half a kilometre behind Binga stood a hazy silhouette of the mine's headgear. Mountainous dumps of crushed rocks and the heaps of overburden around it bore witness men for many years had broken their backs underground to be worthy of their meagre wages. To the east, about two hundred metres from the headgear stood a huge ball mill the size of a mini-bus. A conveyor belt and a crushing plant linked the two structures. All the machinery was stationery. The plant wasn't dead, though its British owners had closed shop. Before closing the mine, the proprietors cited viability concerns and cash-flow constraints rooted in a depressed economy worsened by an erratic supply of electricity.

However, there was something proverbial about descending. Matipa, in one of her unpremeditated sermons to him, stressed the Son of God had to descend before He could be exalted. He, Binga Jochoma, would descend now. After several hours, or days, he would ascend and elevate himself. In Paris lay the springboard to his self-exaltation. Juju would elevate him to celebrity status.

As he stood in the bush about fifty metres from the mine's main ventilation shaft, the breather, he brushed aside the religious thoughts. It was time to descend. He focused on the breather, which used to be a strategic hole, technically a life support line, about half a metre in diameter through which compressed air was pumped to the mine's tunnels and caverns several fathoms below the earth's surface.

Though the sky was starry, it was relatively dark. God created nothing in vain; the darkness would aid him. Seven years of listening to his Bible-thumping wife saw a remote Christian perspective creep into him, like second-hand marijuana smoke.

From that distance, he could only make out the silhouettes of humanly figures that came to the breather from all directions. Crouching men came to the opening and literally vanished at the spot. From the same spot figures jutted out one by one, speaking in low voices and looking warily about. Visibly exhausted and grunting figures also came out carrying heavy sacks and satchels on their backs. The emerging figures disappeared from the scene at a trot, wobbling and panting. At times minutes passed without anyone coming to or emerging from the hole.

There was nothing illusionary about the scene. The breather was now the entrance to a lawless world beneath the earth's surface. Two kinds of people ventured to the subterranean world. The first category was downright murderers in the form of avowed axe-killers. The second was the condescending type that descended into the tunnel with a sacrificial attitude. The latter were people who expected the cutthroats to kill or sexually abuse them, or be robbed of the object of their toil. If they were lucky, they emerged with small gold nuggets. People who ventured underground referred to the tunnels as mortuaries.

Looking at the breather from the shadows, Binga understood the illegal activities at the opening and down in the tunnels where it used to take compressed air were a result of irresponsible, substandard and wolverine politics. Economic sanctions and a ballooning national debt pauperised many workers who now had to descend the breather without the least protection or concern for their own survival. Refocusing and telling himself he wasn't at the mine to ponder politics, he braced for action as he waited for a lull in the movements at the breather.

When there was a break in the movements, Binga broke from the shrubs and quickly walked to the breather. He pulled to his eyes a woollen hat he wore and peered in the square hole. A familiar putrid odour hit his nostrils and he recoiled as if he had smelled a glass of vinegar. What would one expect from mortuaries no one emptied? He mused to himself. The smell coming from the breather required a bit of getting used to. The opening was pitch-black. No sound came from it as though there was no hectic activity underground. However, he knew there was a hive of activity below; men had gone down. He had seen them and counted dozens as he stood in the darkness.

He reckoned hundreds were underground in a lawless world several fathoms from the surface, a world beyond the reach of the government and its police. In crackdowns at all defunct mines plundered by illegal miners, riot police officers, sniffer and attack dogs only managed to cordon the mine and prevent further entry of more men down the breathers and shafts. If the police officers dared go down the shafts and the breathers, the miners killed them in the tunnels. Dumb conditions obtaining underground rendered ineffective teargas canisters cast down shafts and breathers.

Binga considered the risks beneath the surface. There were many ways to die in the tunnels. Gangs roamed underground and robbed the illegal miners of rich ore and gold. When thugs floored a victim with fists or machetes, pinioned him to the ground and pressed a knife against his Adam's apple, he invariably yielded all the gold or ore on him. Venomous snakes in the tunnels killed those who stepped on them. The miners believed snakebite victims were hapless people who didn't worship their ancestors properly or indulged in the sexual act before venturing underground. Daredevil diggers descended about a kilometre from the surface. At that depth, the gold seams were more lucrative than the superfluous ones. A handful of ore could yield over six hundred American dollars, but there was the danger of lethal gas and the risk of little oxygen. These two cousins, lack of oxygen compounded with the lethal gases, killed

without warning. The danger of drowning also lurked. In the lowest tunnels were rivers and manmade plunge pools that took lives.

Other miners neither recovered nor reported to the police the bodies of those who died underground, which they weighted and flung them into the depths of the underground pools. Those who met their death in the upper levels where there was no body of water were buried in rock cairns, or thrown down numerous minor shafts in the tunnels. The miners found convenience anywhere underground, littering the dump floors with faecal deposits. Unsurprisingly, all the shafts, openings, tunnels and other additive barrowings stank of decaying flesh and faeces. The smell clang to clothing like the odour from a defunct morgue; no wonder the tunnels earned the sobriquet *mortuaries*.

From a hip pocket of his trousers, Binga took out a miner's torch and strapped it to his head. An elastic band secured it around his head. He bought the torch, some drill clothes and the woollen hat at a flea market in the City of Kadoma. The torch cast a beam on the ground in every direction he turned. A concrete slab with a lidless manhole, on which a big electric fan used to be mounted, was the remnant of the breather. A small asbestos shed that protected the fan from rain had long been vandalised. Only four steel poles stood around the hole as averment of the earlier existence of such a structure. Thick ropes secured around the poles vanished into the opening. The ropes were old and dangerously worn out in several places. With the aid of these ropes, some illegal miners climbed in or out, but they definitely came in handy when people bumped into each other in the breather, one had to hang on to a rope to let the other pass.

Because the diameter from the opening to the tunnel below was almost even, and the edges were rough, most people descended or ascended spread-eagled as they clang on all four against the walls. If a man slipped, he fell to his death. The walls flailed off the skin, flesh and hair of such unfortunate people. Some landed without faces

altogether, but the miners took solace in the preferred speculation a falling man suffered an anaesthetic concussion when his head hit against the walls for the first time. Their corpses were a revolting sight and were quickly disposed of in the nearest underground pool.

At times robbers hung in the hole like spiders. Other times they waited for emerging prey on the surface, and dispossessed the illegal miners of their ore or gold. Those who went to the lowest depths, to levels thirty-two and thirty-three, spent more than twenty-four hours descending to reach them, a laborious task that physically taxed a man to the bone. On the descent, they rested regularly to replenish strength, but mainly to get accustomed to breathing increasingly thin air. Then they'd go on to scrap the walls and dig the floors for more than two days. Upon emerging, exhausted and burdened with ore, some were bludgeoned or had their necks slit and were thrown down the breather. Upon landing flailed and all bones broken, strangers quickly disposed their bodies. Owing to lethal danger lurking both underground and on the surface, many illegal miners prayed for survival to their ancestors twice daily.

It was time to go down. The *mortuaries* under his feet held the money he, Matipa, Gillian, Nomathemba and Peza required. Money was an anchorage he needed in the extraordinary times of scarcity and desperation. Procrastinating wouldn't fend for him and the people dear to him. He tested the four ropes one after the other. Their lack of tension satisfied him that at least no one was coming to the surface using them, or hang on them somewhere in the depths below. Resolved to descend and, if need be massacre dozens of people for the sake of the four people dearest to him, he fished an Okapi switch-blade knife, flipped it open and held it across his mouth between his teeth. The Okapi was his personal weapon. The axe in his pants was his main weapon.

Crouching, he drew in air and lowered himself into the hole, all his weight on his shoulder muscles until his feet found footing. Here the stench was stronger, but he knew his perception of it would fade.

He went down spread-eagled, the muscles of his arms and legs taut with his weight. The breather spiralled gradually as he descended, and looking down between his legs, he could see some protrusions and footholds. Sharp-edged rocks, the devils that ripped skin and flesh from falling men, made the walls in some areas. Of all the men who had fallen down this breather, people said only one man ever survived. However, they said the man's injuries suggested to some illegal miners to squash his head with a hundred-pound rock.

Binga continued to descend, estimation telling him he had gone down more than ten fathoms now and wasn't too far from the lip of a hard rock protruding from the wall like a sill, which served as a landing. The protrusion, the size of a household toilet windowsill, had withstood dynamite blasts and the jackhammers of Patchway Mine. To a falling man it brought devastation. Perhaps, the lip was the culprit that ripped off faces. Some illegal miners called the protrusion *Face-off*. On it, the illegal miners normally rested for a while to catch their breath and stretch to unknot taut muscles burning with the agony of overexertion. Some stopped to light cigarettes or marijuana cigars in a quest to tone the nerves and gather courage for the final descent or ascent.

Below came the echo from the clatter of several boots finding footing against the wall. Binga continued to descend, almost effortlessly, the torch beam capturing a vacant tunnel down. Neither the lip nor the men coming up were in sight. If the men coming up were a threat, he would hang on the wall with one hand and use the other to open the skull of the uppermost man. The dying man would lethally knock down the rest of his team.

Though he understood robbers had no reason to mug a descending man, it was his nature to practise caution all the time. On hearing some grunts, he stowed the knife and switched off the torch. The grunts and the clatter of boots grew louder. When he could hear heavy breathing, he turned on the light, the axe at the ready. The beam captured four men ascending. The men stopped and looked up

at the beam as he studied them. Between his spread feet was the upturned frightened face of a soiled man of about twenty. They couldn't see him; the beam blinded them, but he saw their pleading faces and read their fear. Young, unarmed and over-exhausted, they were vulnerable.

"Hello, guys?" he said, stowing away the axe, his tone friendly.

"Hello," they grunted in reply, their voices intimidating.

"Pass. I'll cling to the rope." He grabbed one rope and gave way.

One after the other, four young men thanked him as they ascended. All of them carried loaded sachets on their backs. The noise of their boots faded and he heard only faint echoes thereof as he continued descending, the knife back between his jaws. A couple of minutes later, he landed on *Face-off*, stopping briefly to replenish strength in his knotted shoulder and thigh muscles. He had to hurry down and reach the lowest tunnels where daredevils reaped the richest ore. As he left the sill-like rock, it bemused him his nostrils had become immune to the acrid smell of flesh and faecal deposits in the tunnels. Pebbles landing on his head and shoulders were a constant reminder he wasn't the only one in the breather. The gang he met in the breather was still ascending.

Twenty minutes after resuming the descent, he emerged into the dark void that was Level 2, which was a vast openness whose width was about the length of a football pitch. The length of the vast rock-walled emptiness seemed to stretch endlessly away from the shaft, at times terracing, other times sloping gently. Level 2 was seventy metres below the surface, and thirty-five metres below Level 1. From the surface, for one to get to Level 1 one had to go via the main shaft of the mine, Pioneer Shaft. In the old days when the mine was operational, one simply stood in the hoisting cage. If one was strong enough, and wanted to get to Level 1 from Level 2, one went up any one of several staircases curved in the walls. These exerting passages were also the chutes for air to the upper level and those lower. In terms of air supply, the two uppermost levels had enough oxygen for

normal breathing, whether the extra air was blown into them or diffused.

However, the uppermost levels were the most dangerous. In them, one could be ground to blotches and stains of blood. The illicit miners had chipped and blown all the safety pillars in these easily accessible vaults. Illegal gold mining disregarded caution and safety. The miners, in their haste for riches, had destroyed the strategic pillars that rose from the floor and supported the roof like basement columns. Mining engineers and experts had spared the rock structures that were five metres apart in any direction.

The structures were symmetrical and uniform, measuring one metre by one metre and five metres tall. Because of these safety features, all the broad tunnels were once reminiscent of parking bays in a storey building. However, the pillars weren't without gold, tempting the illegal miners to chip and blast them into non-existence. The roofs seemed to hang on air and darkness. The slightest earth tremor could bring them down without warning and crush hundreds of people, trapping hundreds more in lower tunnels. With ventilation passages and the way to the surface sealed, eventually starvation and suffocation would claim them.

Binga guessed the government wouldn't come to their rescue. Its hands were full and there was no money for unnecessary expenditure in its beggar's coffers. The best it could do would be to denounce illegal miners and dispatch the Provincial Governor for political window dressing at the erection of an obelisk on a mass grave.

Still men worked in Level 1 and 2. The clank-clank of chisels chipping the walls or digging the floors was in the darkness studded with flickering candles and torch beams. The crinkling noise of metal upon rock also came from the upper level. Pick-axes, chisels and four-pound hammers were the main tools of the men lost in sheer hard work. The ore from these levels only delivered a man for a week or so from hunger.

Hundreds of cowards scared stiff of depth peopled these upper levels, Binga thought. To his left was the main shaft said to be more than a kilometre deep. Many men had fallen to their deaths in it. Keeping to the wall, he went to the right, negotiating his way around and over shale and stones, and taking care not to step on faeces. About fifty metres away, he reached the opening in the floor that led downwards to Level 3. It wasn't a brainchild of engineers, but a hole dug by the illegal miners for a shortcut to the tunnel below. The longer route would be to go to the nearest stairway down, which was about two hundred metres from where this opening was, but muggers and robbers often jammed the easy passages down.

At times, strangely, these passages harboured sexual perverts. Almost rabid homosexuals risked their lives to rape fellow men underground. Their preferred victims, men wearied by strenuous work and the taxing descent and ascent, were straightforward prey. It boggled him a man could ignore the ore carried by another man and prefer sodomy to wealth. Binga feared one day the defiling acts of the underground homosexuals would anger the gods and bring calamity in the tunnels for everybody.

He lowered himself onto a wire rope with wooden rungs about half a metre apart and dangerously thin. Some were missing and some were broken. One had to depend on the strength of their hands for descent. If a man put all his weight on any rung, he could as well be consigning himself to wheelchair bondage or death thirty-five metres below. Hanging on to the wire rope was torturous to an ordinary man, but ropes, depths and heights had been the mainstay of his commando training. Using thin ropes, he had alighted from hovering helicopters, scaled and descended mountains.

At Wafa-Wafa, he had attained a distinction for hanging on to the knot of a suspended wire rope with one hand and firing with an AK 47 at a moving target with the other. The stint nearly earned him an automatic transfer to the elite Presidential Guard, the regiment for sharpshooters. However, because he was a commando par

excellence, his superiors thought he would be of greater benefit to the country on a battlefield than guarding the presidium.

Binga descended to Level 3 with neither effort nor incident and landed between tramlines. The trolley lines, if followed diligently, linked every level and were the longest route from one level to the other. He quickly walked away from the lines, and stood behind a shoulder-high pillar-stub to study the activities in the broad tunnel.

Scores of men mostly stripped to the waist were at work in rags they deemed work-clothes, but none wore any safety clothing. The wearing of a helmet was cowardly and attracted robbers. When a man bumped into anyone in the eternal darkness and apologised, the miners deemed him a chicken. Any show or exuberance of manners and cordiality was manifestly apologetic and dangerous. Underground, civility ceased to exist. Such cessation gave way to wanton crime in the storied lawless states underneath Zimbabwe.

Many pillars in Level 3 were intact though the diggers had razed down hundreds and taken them to the surface inch-meal in sachets. Chances of the roof collapsing were remote, but it didn't require an engineer to see that if the two levels above collapsed, the remaining pillars would give in to the combined weight on the roof they supported. The intact pillars gave a false sense of safety. However, it worried Binga to see the miners chipping on the last standing structures. Most pillars were nipped in the middle and would eventually resemble a majority of the others looking like stalactites.

"*Hora!*" somebody shouted in the far distance.

Others in all directions picked and amplified his cry. Depending on the angle from which the original cry came from, the illegal miners dropped their tools and took cover on the opposite side of the pillars they were wasting, covering their ears with their hands. *Hora* was the local term for dynamite. All work in the vicinity came to a sudden standstill.

Binga sprang behind the nearest pillar and crouched behind a cowering shale-grimy middle-aged man in a torn overall. The man

held a lit candle in his hand. Somewhere in the candle-flickering darkness, someone whistled excitedly. An ear-splitting blast rang and echoed. The initial echoes were deafening too. Pieces of rocks hissed from the blast in all directions. On hitting pillars and walls, the rocks fragmented like scatter bombs. Large chunks ricocheted from the roof and pillars and rumbled as they rolled on the floor. Big rock fragments, many the size of loaves of bread, a few gigantic enough to plug into manholes and seal them, hit the roof, fell to the floor and rolled away at great speed. A boyish scream sounded, sharp and agonised. A fragment or fragments had hit him. His deathly diminishing cries were blood-cuddling.

A graspable rock hit at an angle a pillar behind Binga and rolled towards them. The man in the overall dived at it, bruising his elbows. His candle blew out in the dive. Binga beamed at him with his torch. The man fumbled with the pockets of a pair of trousers underneath the overall and fished a box of matches. He lit the candle, turned away from Binga and sat cross-legged on the floor. It was common for a person to pick a rock fragment that straight away made them a thousand US dollars richer. By way of cleaning it, the man licked the rock on several places and inspected it closely, his hands shaking with anxiety.

Silence reigned briefly as the choky smell of dynamite further pervaded the air, a welcome perversion that subdued the foul air. Many people coughed and sneezed ceaselessly. Binga estimated the blast had gone off about hundred and fifty metres from where he was. The grimy man bent over, coughing and wheezing and clutching his chest. Binga looked in the direction of the blast and his beam captured plumes of dust spiralling outwards in every direction. Men were rushing into the plumes to pick the gold-rich rock fragments when the dust cleared. Whoever set off the stick of dynamite only got what fell near his pillar. Vultures helped themselves to the rest.

Binga crossed to the man sitting on the floor and stood behind him. When his beam fell on the rock in the man's hands, the yolk-

yellow splashed on the rock sent adrenaline rushing in his veins. From his estimation, about ten percent of the rock was pure gold. The man looked up at him and pocketed the rock, beads of sweat already standing out on his forehead. Binga gave him a friendly smile and nodded as if to congratulate him, but he drew the axe from his trousers.

“You can go home,” he said to the old man, still smiling. “I don’t want the rock. Give me the rations you brought down. That’s not too much to ask.”

The man pointed in the darkness. Binga flashed the area with the beam of his torch and saw a satchel resting against a pillar.

“What’s inside... roasted maize? If it’s maize cobs I’ll take the rock.”

“No. Loose biscuits, bread and baked beans.”

He crossed to the satchel, picked it and walked away. He knew behind him the shaky man was up on his feet and running in the opposite direction. This was Level 3. Its ore wasn’t lucrative to him. He was a daredevil en route to Level 38, about one thousand three hundred and thirty metres from the surface. This was where he was heading for the haul of his life so that his dream of burying the axe could come true. Level 42 was the lowest. Of course, it was inaccessible ordinarily because of the water damming in the four lowest vaults. From the fourth level downwards, water seeped from the walls into the tunnels where a drainage system took it to the levels below. From the seventh level downwards, water oozed from the walls and dripped from the roofs. From the ninth level downwards, the water formed an underground river that stretched for kilometres and flowed through borings to collect in the lowest tunnels.

When the mine was operational, water didn’t dam in the lowest levels. Large water pumps drove out all the water starting at Level 15 to the lowest. Now the mine was defunct and its foreign owners had taken away their pumps and cut electricity supply underground. As if

to compliment the sabotage, illegal miners stole all the copper cables and most of the electrical fittings underground. Water rose daily in the tunnels. As the tunnels filled, the mine was becoming less claimable from an investor's perspective.

As the dust settled and the clamour for rocks sounded everywhere and men converged at the site of the blast, Binga followed tramlines that led away from the main shaft. The lines would lead him out of the enormous cavity into a narrow train-like tunnel. Declining gently, the tunnel stretched for about three kilometres eastwards. From this tunnel, he would emerge into Level 4, which was directly above five levels. Of course, he knew there were men working on this level, just like in all the other accessible levels, but their numbers dwindled with depth.

In Level 4, he would rest for some minutes, eat the provisions he had just acquired and then start a direct descent to the levels below via spiralling interconnecting breathers until he reached Level 9. From the seventh level downwards, most miners wore raincoats to protect themselves from dripping cold water believed to induce pneumonia. He would definitely need a raincoat and would strip someone of one for his convenience. From Level 9, he would go down wooden ladders to Level 10 where he intended to rest for a few minutes. Intermittent rest was of the essence, in case he might suffer from fatigue and fellow robbers overpowered him in the tunnels. From Level 10, he would walk westwards along tramlines again for another three kilometres to Level 11, which crowned another five levels directly beneath it.

His route to prepossessing Level 38 was clear in his mind as distilled water in a sparkling glass. He had enough backup cells for his torch. As he walked, the ceaseless clanks of the labour of unseen men echoed in the catacomb of openings, minor shafts and tunnels. He would've preferred to trot, but the tramlines strewn with pebbles could tire him unnecessarily.

He thought of Mjomba. He would reward the Malawian. Then he found himself thinking again about Nomathemba, Matipa, Gillian and Peza. In that order he thought of them, and in that order they struck his heart.

Chapter 12

Matipa spent 26 November fasting indoors, only emerging to pray. After breaking the fast in the evening, she bid Peza goodnight and went to bed, but the prophet's words haunted her as she lay under the blankets. What tormented her was the certainty of the prophecy. In her imagination, she saw a swarthy character walking into the compound. The character cursed and damned everyone with words and gestures.

On waking up the next day, 27 November, she put on her religious garments and went outside to pray. Prayer wasn't an indoor affair to the sect's members. Their cue came from Jesus' escapades in the wilderness. She knelt in prayer in the area in front of the house she designated for supplication. Facing eastwards, she levelled her eyes at the point of sunrise in the dark far distance. Under a starry sky and in her white garments flowing and flapping in the hot November wind she was angelic. She made sure the tail of her matching headscarf also covered her feet completely as stipulated by the sect's elders.

Distant cries of birds reminded her of the compound's location in the midst of a vanishing forest. The workers' compound at Sakis Mine was sleepy and in semi-darkness. Open spaces and footpaths were deserted. Drunken figures returning from drinking binges in surrounding compounds moved here and there. However, prayer and prayer time weren't dependent on the presence or absence of detractors.

She crossed herself thrice, opened her hands and spread her arms. Her voice drawn and sangfroid she prayed, "In the holy name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.... Amen." She clasped her hands and paused briefly "O God, Lord Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Creator of the Heavens and the earth, I pray to you through the Archangel Gabriel and Michael, the commanders of

hosts of heavenly angels in the Heavens and on earth. Archangel Gabriel, I present to you my prayer that you set it before the Holy Gate manned by Peter. Oh, Peter, you whom Christ gave the heavenly keys because of your belief, open the Holy Gate for Archangel Gabriel to enter and present my prayer to the Lamb. Christ, receive and present my prayer to the Holy Throne of the Father surrounded by hosts of angels in their infancy, seven hundredfold glory and seven ever-burning fires standing for the overriding power of the heavenly Kingdom, where the only song sang continuously is:

Hosanna! Gloria! Halleluiab!
God Almighty be forever happy,”

She paused to catch her breath; she had to drag and sing many elements of the prayer before she could inhale. Now, with the mandatory opening over, she sent her petition.

“Father, I pray you bring back my husband. Herd Akar Muja back home, for I know there’s no shortage of angels in Heaven for that job. Bring him back to me unharmed that we may leave this mine as a family and as ceremoniously as possible despite the disgrace. Bring him home before the advent of the demon. Cripple the demon that he cannot reach Sakis Mine. Bind the demon with an invisible cord that he may not walk. Blind his eyes that he may not see.”

She paused again. She was now about to close her prayer and had to move from *self* and pray for others. She prayed for the President of the Republic, a normal rain season and the safety of the mine’s workers.

She unclasped her hands and spread her arms again. “Our Lord and Master, I now rest my petition. May Your Grace and the mercy of Your Beloved Son, whom the Jews slaughtered overseas, reside in

the hearts of believers so that all who believe attain eternity. Abide in us today and forever, Amen.”

She crossed herself thrice again, rose steadily and genuflected thrice facing the east, her hands clasped. Then she waved her hands in the air in bidding farewell to the Spirit and its legion of angels.

She entered the house and sat in a sofa instead of going into the bedroom to remove the flowing garments in preparation for chores. Peza lay at her feet on the floor. She worried sick about her husband and the boy. Was it a wise idea to tell Peza a devil would come looking for his father? It seemed sensible to inform him for his safety. Peza had to be cautious in case the demon arrived in Akar’s absence. She shook Peza awake.

The boy grumbled and opened his eyes. “Hey? Where do you want to send me?”

“There’s something I must tell you, Peza.”

He yawned. “Tell me, Mother.”

“Yester night I was summoned to the shrine. The prophet wanted to tell me something.”

“Has the prophet returned?”

“He returned on 26 November and sent for me.”

“Hasn’t he told you everything already?” He yawned again and sat up. “When’re we going to be rich, Mammy? Did the prophet change his mind?”

“Only God knows when, but we’ll be rich beyond measure. The prophet doesn’t utter lies and the prophecies have nothing to do with his mind.”

He smiled. “When we become rich, will we live in Mr Keneas’ house?”

She laughed. “No. We’ll live in a very big house with a swimming pool. House cleaners and gardeners will work for us. You’ll go to an elite school.”

“Where’ll you find a house bigger than Mr Keneas’?”

“We’ll buy a big house in Harare.”

“Are there enough schools in the city? Where’ll I do Grade One?”

“There’re many schools in Harare. We’ll enrol you in a good school.”

His face lit with excitement. “When do you enrol me?”

“Of course, we’ll find you a good school when we move to the city. We can’t enrol you earlier?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I mean, do you enrol me before or after we become rich?”

“First we become rich, then we relocate to Harare and then we find you a good school.”

“How is a good school different from a bad school?”

“A good school has flowerbeds and friendly teachers. Pupils at a good school pass.”

“If my teacher speaks to me in English, what do I say?”

“The teacher will teach you how to speak in English first.”

“Did Daddy return last night?”

She shook her head, his questions beginning to exasperate her. “I woke you up because I wanted to tell you something the prophet told me.”

“Are we still going to become rich?”

“Of course, Peza, the Man of God doesn’t speak lies.” She paused and vainly searched for child-friendly words. “The prophet said a demon in human form shall come looking for your father.”

“Mammy, what’s a demon in human form?”

“I’ve to be honest with you Peza. I really don’t know.”

He was shocked. “You don’t know?”

“I can’t know everything. No one in this world knows everything.”

“How about people who invented aeroplanes and computers, don’t they know everything?”

“They only know about the aeroplanes and the computers and a few other things. Only God knows everything. Prophet Jatropa talks to this God and His angels.”

“Didn’t you ask the prophet for a description?”

“He gave me a vague description. I assumed this demon was a brutal being that devoured children. You mustn’t linger when the demon comes.”

“Are demons in the habit of visiting compounds? Do they’ve the ability to knock on doors?”

“What I told you is what the prophet said,” she said. “The devil will carry you away if you’re not careful.”

“Mother, what does a demon look like?” he asked.

“I told you I don’t know!”

“No, Mammy. You said you didn’t know what a demon in human form looks like. I’m asking about an ordinary demon.”

“A demon can look like a tree or a man or a baboon or... or Father Christmas if its Christmas time. Only a prophet of God knows what a demon looks like. I suppose this demon will look like a peasant farmer, a vegetable vendor, a tinker or anyone you know.”

“I’ll run away. Can it catch me?”

“No one can run away from a demon. But you can hide.”

“Where’s the demon coming from?”

“Demons can come from the north or the south. They can come from the east or the west.”

“Mother, are we in the east or in the south?”

“You ask too many questions, Peza.”

“I want to be sure so that I don’t run in the wrong direction. This demon, is it the one that crucified Jesus?”

“We’ll see when it comes. Perhaps we’ll be gone by the time it arrives because God is on our side.”

He smiled in anticipation of action and the spectacle of a demon in human form. The compound was eventless and daunting. Anything new would excite some people, especially children. Matipa

knew children liked to see things, which was why they cheered low-flying aircrafts that seldom passed over the mine. She understood his admixture of fear and excitement.

However, she had many questions too, though no shadow of doubt existed in her the Man of God had seen the truth. The prophet had said many alarming things, most of which needed demystification or she might succumb to anxiety and dread.

“This is what you do when the demon comes.”

Peza leaned forward.

Chapter 13

At 9:15 pm, Matipa came out of the house in her apostolic garments and locked the door. Peza was in the sitting room watching television, which would occupy him until he slept in the sofa. If the demon came in her absence, it would find the door locked. Peza wasn't to speak or betray his presence in the dwelling. If it tried to break the door, Peza would quietly climb out of the house through the back window in the bedroom and run to Mr Keneas' house. Mr Gilchrist Keneas kept a loaded pistol all the time. The mill manager would come and shoot dead the demon, if it had human life in it.

Matipa walked away from her house and out of the compound. The prophecy troubled her. She just had to see the man who spoke with angels and God for him to allay her fears. The past two days the thought of her husband had tortured her. Ever since she had learnt of his dark side, she had never feared for him the way she did now. Lately, with an intense singleness of mind, she was praying for nothing but his urgent return, and calling for injury and disability to the prophesied demon.

Ever since the prophecy of the demon, she slept fitfully. The previous night she dreamt struggling through nightmarish landscapes peopled by fire-spitting demons. Akar featured in the dream, his back turned to her. Things she couldn't see occupied him. A yawning gulf stood between them. She called to him, but demonic winds captured her words and sent them in the wrong direction.

She took the path to the cemetery and the obelisk. She would bypass the shrine and head westwards for about fifteen minutes to the prophet's residence. She had many things to ponder and told herself she mustn't be scared of the ghosts of strangers who had been of no consequence to her when they were alive. As a precaution, she would sing songs in honour of the Archangel Michael. If there were

any evil spirits lurking, the belligerent archangel would drive them away, or smite them.

She walked boldly, her mind preoccupied with the prophet's words in their exactitude.

"Your husband is alive and well. He's in one piece though he exiled himself from light. By appearance, God cut him from the same silk as the Devil. In a few days, a demon of impeccable manners shall come looking for your husband. I repeat this in the hearing of the council of elders: A demon of impeccable manners shall come looking for your husband, Madzimai Matipa. Your husband must be home to meet the demon. You shall recognise him from his good manners and the plumage of the raven, which is his clothing. The claws of the eagle are this demon's grip. Of Enoch, God dictated word by word to Moses: Enoch walked with God and was not. As if not to be outdone, this fiend walks with the Devil and he shall be not. The Devil shows his pleasure to those who please him by displeasing them. I cannot tell you more. You're soft spiritually and fear for the flesh."

The prophet had turned to the twelve elders and posed a question to Madzibaba Tinashe. The memory of the whole event of yester night was vivid in her mind.

"For a man to sustain the life in him, how many lungs does he need?"

The elder was at a loss for an answer, but responded hesitantly. *"Two, my lord, he had stammered. A person can do with one in an emergency or illness."*

"Beware the demon spits venom and shoots quills. Its urine is inflammable. Madzibaba Tinashe, from it put the same distance a saint would put between himself and a brothel. From Adam's rib cage, God drew a bone and made Eve. Let no one use something of such creative value to take the other's life. This is my message to you, Madzibaba Tinashe."

The elder had crossed himself thrice and sat dumbfounded.

She had enquired from the prophet how she could protect herself from the coming demon. His response was somewhat evasive:

"Madzimai Matipa, if a dying buffalo staggers in your direction, you can only move out of its way to avoid injury. You can recite all the Psalms, but if you don't want the sight of blood don't go to a beheading. If a beheaded man staggers

in your direction, take your leave to avoid sight of his blood. But I shall pray for the Archangel Michael to stand bodyguard over your family.”

Matipa didn't know how she passed the cemetery and the obelisk. The words of the Man of God her preoccupation, she neither summoned Archangel Michael nor sang any song. Without incident, she crossed the ghostly dusty veldt between the bush and the hill on which the shrine stood. She took a westward path and walked parallel to the hills for some time before she came to a low pass between large boulders and walked between them, stiffly. The shadows the boulder cast frightened her a little, but fear couldn't stall the repertoire of the prophet's words. It didn't make sense a demon would come looking for her husband. Her husband was demonic. Would Satan come to fight Satan? The Messiah had once said a kingdom divided fell.

The Man of God had said *the plumage of the raven was his clothing*. Perhaps, understandably, Prophet Jatropa spoke figuratively about the coming to the compound of a police officer. That an officer of the law in eye-catching clothes would come looking for her husband didn't require strenuous deciphering skills. Akar was criminal. He could be on the police's *Most Wanted* list for robbery or murder.

However, the manner Akar spoke, smiled and bore himself in her presence didn't proclaim him the savage he was rumoured to be. Every line of his countenance was almost priestly. He hadn't laid his hand on Peza or on her all his life. Rarely had he raised his voice in anger. If she discounted the occasions he forced himself on her in the matrimonial bed, her husband was a genteel man by any standard.

The prophet had said God cut him from the same fabric as the Devil, a fact earthly verifiable. The statement was a definite prophetic utterance. Akar could only be evil and criminal. The word of a prophet had more weight than her earthly assessment. Suddenly conflicting perspectives clashed in her head, and she didn't know what to conclude.

Beyond the hills, a few stone throws away, was a farm compound as backward as theirs, but more desolate because it was a farming settlement. The prophet lived here in huts of pole and clay. A wheel-less, windowless, panel-less carcass of an old yellow Zephyr Zodiac saloon disintegrating in his homestead set his dwelling apart.

His father, a poor man, had once driven the car in its prime when even the poor could afford to buy cars. The prophet inherited the car upon his father's death. It broke down from lack of maintenance and a saddling economy. The prophet let himself live and the Zephyr die. His kitchenware comprised of pots and dishes made from the panels of the old car. He built the car's door windows and their frames into his sitting hut and bedroom. As a result, the huts were unique in the compound and in the area.

Matipa didn't need to remove any shoes; she had come barefoot. She slowed down to approach the homestead with dignity and reverence. A slack stockade surrounded the huts. Through the gaps in it, she saw that the prophet was standing in his *kirawa*, a small, consecrated ground in a corner of his yard. The Man of God's shrine consisted of a waist-high cactus standing like a traffic police officer signalling a motorist to stop and park right where the officer was. Church elders said the prophet spoke to the plant in tongues, a profound manifestation of spiritual power. Around the cactus were numerous small earthen bowl-like vessels, *mbiya*. Usually some bore water, some lay inverted, and some were in pieces the prophet didn't discard. White stone pebbles demarcated the holy ground from the rest of the yard where children could play and chores could be undertaken. The *kirawa* was the size of the floor of a small hut.

Her hands clasped in humility, she walked through a gateless entrance and knelt near the carcass of the Zephyr Zodiac. About six metres lay between her and the men. Two figures in white robes sat at the edge of the sacred ground looking up at Prophet Jatropa. The figures were too dark for recognition, but the prophet was distinct from his lofty figure and withered frame. That the Great Spirit would

reside in an otherwise papery person like Jatrophia always humbled Matipa and increased her awe of the Creator. Darkness prohibited her from seeing the contents of the vessels. Prophet Jatrophia was speaking on top of his voice, and she could hear every word.

“*Madzibaba* Tinashe,” the prophet said. “Reflect not on the evils of your neighbour. Be not envious of your neighbour’s splendour and success, for each has its special niche in our existence. Envy puts gall in your heart and error in all your ways. May the peace of the Lord dwell with you.”

“Amen,” answered *Madzibaba* Tinashe, his voice confirming it was indeed the elder from Sakis Mine.

“The demon is on its way. Anomy shall reign on this mine and the surrounding country. Remember to keep your distance from this devil.” He turned to another figure on the ground. “*Madzibaba* Remegio, on the day of this demon’s arrival, indoors will mean the difference between life and death. Nevertheless, if he finds you in the nude it’ll be a bonus for you. Nudity forces a person to cherish privacy and remain indoors. That way, nothing will scathe you. The demon shall reign over all areas including the shrine on the hill. Let God’s truth be your shield and buckler.”

“Amen.” It was the youthful voice of Remegio, now toned down by fear and contemplation. “My lord, allow me to ask. How do I know the day the demon will come? I wish to stay indoors for my safety as the Spirit suggests.”

“Roaring preludes the appearance of a marauding lion. Prevailing peace shall be disturbed. There shall be a disturbance marked by screaming. Many people shall lock themselves in their dwellings. That day is not far into the future. Beginning the day after tomorrow, stay indoors for one week. On the day, God shall send something unusual to notify you.”

“Man of the God, what’s the unusual thing that’ll prelude the coming of the demon?”

“From the days of Noah, the Holy Bible shows us birds are a communication tool. God shall send a vulture. Pray the Lord delivers you from the snare of the fowler.”

“Amen.” The teenager answered.

The prophet turned to Matipa kneeling beside the Zephyr. “*Madzimai* Matipa, seeker of the words of the living God to whom my soul and being are attached, hearer of truth in faithfulness in whose heart there’s no gall or wormwood, I see your woes, your weaknesses and your fears.” He paused and inhaled loudly. “Of fear, didn’t God dictate word by word to Moses that you should fear not? Of the Messiah, didn’t Isaiah state He would delight only in the fear of the Lord? Fear to fear other things for such fear is pagan, pagan worship and of pagan invention. These words are sufficient to anyone who discerns with the inner ear. Because of your husband, a demon is on its way to this area. May God give His angels charge over you.”

“Amen. My Lord, I pray you tolerate my question.”

“Ask, *Madzimai* Matipa.”

“Can Satan fight Satan?”

“The demon is not coming to fight, but to fortify himself. For refuge, abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

“Amen. My prophet and my lord, pray that my husband returns. I cannot vacate without him or his consent.”

“The Word of the Spirit ought to be sufficient for you, *Madzimai* Matipa. Say I this to you now. I don’t order you, but the Spirit bids you leave Sakis Mine forthwith. May the Lord deliver you from the noisome pestilence coming.”

“Amen. My lord, my woes, weaknesses and fears are clear to you. May the Spirit wish and will me to leave with my husband.”

“The wishes and the will of man are mundane. They cannot be the wishes and will of the Spirit. May God help your unbelief.”

“Amen. My lord, if I flee a demon, will I’ve standing in the sight of the Lord? Aren’t we supposed to fear Him alone?”

“Job cried thus to the Lord, but He answered Him: *Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge.* Remember, death is a Heavenly appointment. Make God’s bosom your habitation.”

“Amen. In the same book of Job, the chronicler wrote, *Thou shalt also decree a thing.* Decree I leave Sakis with my husband.”

“Heaven my witness, the pit in which Joseph was cast was his blessing, so is the dismissal letter in your possession. The footsteps of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I see and in them walk. From the lessons of these holy men of renown and marvels, I draw lessons. To impose your will on the Spirit is a sin against the Spirit. God won’t pardon all sins against the Spirit. If you walk in God’s statutes, won’t you receive rain in its season? We dwell in a remorseless exile when we should be in Canaan, that’s the reason we suffer and fear. May the Lord deliver you from the coming noisome pestilence.”

“Amen.” She crossed herself thrice, an indication she was resting her argument.

An interlude of tongues followed. Prophet Jatropa spoke forcefully and gestured vigorously pointing to the east and the west. The incomprehensible words and the gestures seemed to drive him into a rage. Bending, he picked something from the ground and stood erect, the tongues still rattling out of him. She noticed he had picked a capped bottle filled with water. He uncapped it and poured a measure into a cupped hand. Walking briskly, he crossed to her and cast the water into her face. Then he circled her thrice, pouring the rest of the water on the ground around her until the wet circle enclosed them. She felt his hand on the crown of her head as he prayed for her in the language she couldn’t place except for the words *Judea, Abraham, Moses, search Michael, I hear you Gabriel* and *stand down Metatron.*

He placed the empty bottle on her head and continued to pray. Then suddenly, after a while, he threw the bottle towards the cactus plant near *Madzibaba* Tinashe and Remegio. The bottle hit a stone and shattered. Remegio rose and quickly gathered all the shards and

fragments into an earthen vessel, which he placed under the plant and resumed his position.

Prophet Jatrophia wiped her wet face with the loose end of the white shawl draped over his right shoulder toga-style, and returned to the *kirawa* singing quietly in harmonious tongues. Still singing, he squatted at the cactus and picked an earthen vessel and the shard of a bottle. With the shard, he scribbled something inside the vessel, put it down, picked another, and again went on to scrawl in it.

Matipa grew anxious. Her kneecaps began to hurt from prolonged kneeling, but she was relieved at least Heaven was intervening. The prophet brought the two vessels to her and placed one in each of her hands.

“Heaven my witness,” he said tonelessly, “Archangel Gabriel wiped your tears. The Lord has delivered this devil into your hands. Let God’s truth be your shield and buckler.”

“Amen.”

“Take the vessels home and keep them inverted in a private place. If you really want your husband to return, shatter them. You may do so tonight if your heart says so. May God squash your enemies.”

“Amen.”

“I’ve cleared your path home of adders, vipers and ghosts that you may go back in safety and without fear the way you came. I open my ears to your enquiries and queries. If you’ve none, it’s high time you crossed yourself and left. May you abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

The eventful prayer and the vessels in her hands mystified her. The whole thing was now beyond questions but depended on belief. *God*, she prayed mutely, *grant me the faith You had in Yourself when You spoke the Word, which created Heaven and earth and parted light from darkness. If You didn’t have faith in Yourself, the universe as we know it wouldn’t have come into existence. I don’t want to live in fear. I’m your protégé, Lord of hosts.*

She crossed herself thrice and rose. She would've wanted to express her gratitude verbally in the meantime, but the Man of God was against such expressions, always reminding those who did that his rewards came from Heaven. Thanking him was mundane and pagan.

Wordlessly, she walked out of the homestead stockade. Holding the vessels like treasure, she retraced the path home, but she wasn't certain prophet had unburdened her. She visited the prophet for him to allay her fears and possibly barricade the demon from entering Sakis Mine, but his rhetoric seemed irrefutable confirmation the demon was on its way and many people were in danger. Concisely, chaos and death were in the offing.

When she reached the shadowy pass outflanked by the tall boulders, she paused to hurl the vessels on them. However, curiosity curbed her forthwith. What did the prophet scribble in the bowls? Why had he given her two vessels, not one or three? Why was it expedient she had to break them to induce her husband's return? Why did the prophet not break them himself?

She reasoned the vessels were symbolic of something and sacrificial too. From the unrepentant recesses of her mind came a warning the prophet possibly etched her son's name and that of someone dear to her in the vessels. She missed a heartbeat. She wouldn't want to lose Peza or anyone dear to her in order to gain her husband. Despite herself, she thought Prophet Jatropa was evil, but she sanctified herself with a cross because such thoughts were satanic. If the prophet were evil, it meant the god he called to in prayer was evil too. However, if indeed he had scribbled Peza's name in the vessels or in one of them, she would disrobe herself, tear all the apostolic garments and burn them in front of her house. She would denounce Jatropa and Baba Johannes. Again, she crossed herself. Prophet Jatropa was godly, but her foolish mind was baselessly condemning a righteous Man of God.

"Leave me, Satan," she ordered loudly with a severity magisterial.

She quickened her pace. The prophet had cleared the footpath of threats and danger. She would get home and examine what he wrote. If he had written in an indecipherable hand under the influence of tongues, she would break the bowls that very night before she went to bed. She would leave with her husband. There was no way she could leave Sakis Mine without him when they came as a couple. Silently she rebuked the Man of God for refusing to say prayers that could avert the coming of the demon and prevent subsequent calamity on innocent people. Perhaps the demon would maim or kill some people, or instil insanity into the heads of her neighbours. The community would lay the blame squarely on her and Akar Muja.

She held the vessels in one hand, clutched the lower parts of her garment with the other, significantly raising the hem from the ground, and began to run, but running wasn't her custom. Her calves and thigh muscles hurt before she turned away from the stretch of hills onto the treeless veldt. Her mouth dried, but she couldn't afford to stop. When she was between the obelisk and the graveyard, fatigue slowed her down. It wasn't sensible to rest between two ghostly places. Though her nostrils felt as if they were breathing hot air, she resolved not to stop. Only the creeping in of cramp or an ankle dislocation could stop her. She trotted past the graveyard without looking at it.

Only when the Sakis Mine compound was within her sight did she stop to catch her breath. She set the vessels down and stooped, her hands on her knees, and panted for a while. She would approach and enter the compound with decency. There were chances someone might see her running and people might draw many malicious conclusions. Besides, it was indecent for a married woman to run, and unreligious for a figure in holy robes to appear frantic.

She walked steadily into the compound and headed to her house, the only one with a satellite dish pitched on the roof. The gadget stood like some ambassadorial pendant. Because of this gadget, many envious people hated them. Many people in the compound had old-

fashioned radio-sets as their most valuable property. Most of the sets had wooden legs designed after predators, and were outdated beyond repair. A few households had black-and-white television sets. Discounting the Mujas, only two other households had colour television sets.

The wall clock in their sitting room-cum-kitchen read 11:45 pm when she locked the main door, stepped over Peza sleeping on the floor and entered her bedroom. She quickly switched on the bedroom's naked bulb. One after the other she looked inside the earthen vessels. The prophet had written single words in each vessel, but they were difficult to read.

She decided to concentrate on one at a time, and set the other on the bed. The first one was a ten-letter word she struggled to read because of the prophet's calligraphic handwriting. She scrutinised the word letter by letter, and, sighing with relief, prematurely concluded it was in tongues. The vessel tilted at an angle, she tried to read the word again. No, there was nothing outlandish or Aramaic about the word. It was a familiar feminine Ndebele name uncommon among the Shona-speaking people:

NOMATHEMBA

The name rang a bell in her head. She remembered that her husband, in the vagaries of erotic pleasure, seldom mistook her for Norma, which could be a shortened corruption of Nomathemba. The prophet was telling her something about this woman and her husband. A lump swelled in her heart. If she could find this *prostitute*, she would claw her to death.

What did the prophet etch in the second bowl? Perplexed and frowning, she set the vessel on the bed and picked the second one. Again one word was inscribed:

GILLIAN

The name was unfamiliar. She couldn't place any face against it. Her husband had never uttered it. Was her husband co-habiting with Nomathemba and Gillian at once?

Chapter 14

The raindrops were cold and struck Binga Jochoma like small pebbles. He felt the equatorial rain on his body, and woke up with a start and found himself lying on hard ground. The battlefield was dangerously quiet. Instinctively, he vainly felt for his AK 47 on his right and then on his left. Somewhere a bomb with the power to demolish an entire village went off, blasting in diminishing echoes.

He cringed and blamed himself for the stupidity of sleeping with his personal weapon out of reach, which could cost him his life. Raising his head cautiously, he saw three flickering lights in the distance, lowered his head and lay still. He knew DRC rebels were after him or surviving members of his platoon. This was the Eastern Front in the DRC, the world's richest poorest country.

At this front, Rwandan Hutu FDLR insurgents and Mai Mai Cheka militiamen were a marauding menace, and war raged savagely. The rebels were powerful and over-armed, outnumbering the platoon one to ten. To the rebels, the war seemed to mean rape of females from minors to adults, violating victims before their families. In fetish-driven circumstances, they left infants and toddlers bleeding. However, the enemy was an untrained, noisy militia constantly maddened by all-night gang rapes that placed the Congo on the atlas as the rape capital of the world.

The silence and absence of the rest of Binga's unit, fifty-one men, meant the rebels routed them. This damned war must end, he thought self-piteously.

Perhaps the enemy knew he was alive; hence, the flickering lights. He was a commando, a man trained to survive and fight with or without the AK 47. The destructive war had to pursue its course, but his skills and aptitude would see to it that he ravaged the enemy. The rifle Mikhail Kalashnikov invented was a weapon, so was a

commando. The words the regiment's commander spoke at their pass-out parade rang in his head, "A commando is capable of an accomplished performance out of any predicament. The armament industry makes ammunition and bombs, but Wafa-Wafa manufactures its own weaponry in the form of the military commandos on this pass-out parade! The government of Zimbabwe through the Ministry of Defence has invested in you! You're weapons!"

Binga looked up and blinked several times in disbelief. The sky was pitch-black, which was strange. For a tropical sky to lack stars or the moon was a rare phenomenon. The air lacked the humus odour of the rainforest. No owl, cricket or cicada cried. Binga's jaw dropped. Was he still at the front or in some hospital or morgue in Lubumbashi? He feared the enemy had shelled him into derision.

Many things started to boggle his mind. The cold drops falling on him meant a violent equatorial rain was coming. Strangely, there were neither accompanying boisterous winds nor the typical ferocious tropical thunder and lightning. Except for the lights that had flickered and the bomb blast somewhere in the vicinity, nothing else seemed to show he was still on a planet of his familiarity.

Cold and drenched in rain, he had no idea how long he had lain exposed to the elements. A cautionary nook in his mind warned him against prolonged exposure and pneumonia. *I must find warmth and food*, he thought, *but I mustn't stray beyond enemy lines. No, I won't die in a foreign country and posit the rebels the pleasure of lifting my head high as a war trophy. I'll make it back to my country.*

As he reflected, he fingered his clothing, running his hands on his sleeves and the breast of his clothing. He was neither in a bandolier of bullets or military fatigues. Reality dawned on him and he sighed with relief on realising he had been dreamy.

Yawning, he brought a hand to his forehead and switched on the torch, full realisation and his bearings dawning on him. He was underground, precisely in Level 37 of Patchway Mine eighteen

kilometres to the northwest of Kadoma. This level was approximately one thousand three hundred metres from the surface. Level 38 below was the last accessible level. Levels 39 to 42 were flooded. Below him, a team of six men was working cooperatively. His wristwatch said it was 7:20 pm. The date was 27 November. A rough mental calculation revealed he had been underground for about nineteen hours now.

In the fierce 1998-2003 war, State media reported that Rwandan Hutu and Mai Mai Cheka rebels had invaded the Democratic Republic of the Congo in an attempt to topple the government of Laurent Kabila, an erstwhile rebel leader who seized power from Mobuto, the Lion of Zaire, through undemocratic means. The DRC war, which was often his waking thought, ended more than a decade ago, but its bitter memories haunted him.

Perhaps the army should've looked for psychologists to counsel the troopers at the end of the war. Some returnees he knew were nervous wrecks. One corporal sergeant who survived severe shrapnel wounds near Lake Mweru permanently turned to vodka and prostitutes in vain attempts to occupy himself. When drunk, the sergeant relived many battles and torturous passages through minefields. The officer talked about bowel-moving battles in the small town of Luvungi in the eastern Democratic of the Congo, and sobbed like a child.

Binga checked his clothing again, now that he was fully awake and in possession of his faculties. A one-piece black or green raincoat worn like a poncho covered him down to the lower thighs. Only his shoes and the legs of his pair of trousers were wet. When he slept in this place about four hours ago, it had been relatively dry. It appeared the roof had become more porous during his sleep, or the rivulets of water stuck on the roof had shifted as they normally did.

He reflected on the six men working on Level 38. Two of the men had machetes. Binga wasn't scared of such primitive weapons. Cowards displayed them to intimidate. Real fighters shunned

displaying weapons or skills. Such stupidity had its place in kung-fu films only, for entertainment. Real fighters killed, often empty-handed. The bull that spent time digging in an expression of its anger usually lost the fight.

In a couple of hours the men would come up through an opening near where he lay, he had calculated. Their dwindling food provisions hinted him so. From their conversation, he had learnt that they had been underground for four days. Their hands were bandaged and bloody from rupturing callous skin. He had lurked in the darkness and listened to them as they took turns to dig, pound the ore in a metal crude mortar, and nurse their sore hands. The work was strenuous. They languished, hard put to emerging from the crust of the earth with as much gold as possible. Unlike most of the illegal miners he had seen underground, this group wouldn't emerge burdened with ore.

Without despairing, Binga waited for the group. Patience and laying ambushes were typical of most predators. In the meantime, he occupied himself with developments from his waking thoughts despite the cold underground. As a soldier, he had survived worse conditions. Bivouacking in winter was basic in military training and war situations. He recalled the most challenging times when the war became full-fledged in the central African country and Zimbabwe plunged her sons, daughters and resources into it, to do battle for a foreign cause and sovereignty.

Binga fought at Pweto and Ikela, both sprawling battlefields and graveyards. The war at the latter, that special place under the nose of God, was a monotonous play. The drama had many intermissions in the form of violently thunderous tympanic tropical rain. As the war and the rains raged, defaced civilians branded traitors came to seek refuge among the soldiers. Rebels concealing machetes and grenades also posed as displaced civilians and camped with the allied soldiers. The consequences were always disastrous.

Chapter 15

At house number 5988, Mtombeni St in Tshabalala high-density suburb of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second capital city, Nomathemba missed her wedded husband. The evening was hot. Coupled with the heat, frustration, despair and uncertainty disoriented her. Other pressures she could stand, but sexual deprivation wretched her soul. Sexual pleasure happened to be the very essence of her being and existence. Prolonged deprivation and dejection complimented the other in giving her an older appearance than her twenty-nine years.

Nevertheless, she was a staunch believer in the spiritual essence of sexual intimacy. During her three-year stint in Britain, which began when she was twenty, she laid her hands on copies of the Gnostic Gospels Roderick Morris, one of her boyfriends, brought her. An archaeologist and a member of Britain's Society of Archaeologists, he brought her a copy of the Gospel of Judas Iscariot and one purportedly penned by Mary Magdalene for her perusal and appreciation. The man of forty's companion and Bible was Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. He had defaced every page of his copy with notes and cross-reference markings.

From seemingly an immoral union with the archaeologist, a spiritual awakening ensued. His convictions, though they were somehow bizarre and downright blasphemous, sparked elation in her. Associating with Roderick boasted her self-worth. Going by the numerous things she learnt from him, she began to see the mystery of life from a sexually inspired perspective.

In nothing but a brassiere and a pair of panties, Nomathemba paced their humble four-roomed house. She wandered into the kitchen, and then into the lounge consisting of a set of substandard wooden chairs and a table. A blaring fourteen-inch television set was the dearest piece of furniture in the room. The audio volume of the

set had to be high all the time, her attempt to let the television capture her attention.

She wanted to watch and follow the programmes on the set to dissuade her mind from dwelling on things that gnawed her spirit and self-worth, but all the programmes were an awful bore. She slumped in one of the chairs and stared at the discoloured wall in front of her. As usual, the television set only captured her attention briefly.

A cheap quartz wall clock put the hour at a few minutes past eight in the evening. The faces of her two daughters in eight portraits alongside the clock stared back at her, further disorienting her. The bubbling faces belonged to Nyanyadzi and Rusitu Jochoma. They were in their infancy, smiling, immaculate and lovely, jewels God gave them. At their birth she had fallen in love with them, Celine Dion's *I'm alive*, and *A new day has come*. Nyanyadzi and Rusitu were long dead though she felt as though she had lost them the day before.

Nomathemba and Binga married in the local Baptist Church when Binga was twenty-three and recently returned from his tour of duty in the DRC. She was twenty when she held his hand in holy matrimony. He used his army's Foreign Service gratuity package to marry her and pay for all the wedding expenses. Before a priest, they vowed not to part until death. After a month, Binga deserted the army citing poor remuneration and the idiocy of believing in the phoney nobility in dying for the State, political sovereignty or integrity. He no longer believed in sacrifice not centred on self.

About seven years ago when he went AWOL, she recalled, he hardly resided at the house. However, the Commando Regiment and the Paramilitary Police unleashed stern soldiers to find him. The couple was living in a high-density suburb of Harare. She was a recently qualified schoolteacher working in the neighbourhood. The officers forced Binga to lead the gutter life of a rat.

Binga was often away for a month or longer and returned in the middle of the night devoid of sexual appetite. When she attempted to rouse him, he made curt remarks or brushed her hands away from

him. She began to suspect he had a girlfriend or a family somewhere. At the table, he sat hatchet-faced and grim. Yet in their romantic days, they enjoyed intimacy and played cards on the same table. He was expert at sweeping up the cards and shuffling them with the seasoned virtuosity of a professional casino gambler.

Within four months, the paramilitary officers held and interrogated her several times at a military base outside the city. Her responses were inconsistent, culminating in them subjecting her to physical torture. In military custody and throughout a weeklong ordeal, she professed ignorance of her husband's whereabouts, which was indeed nothing but the truth. Upon her release, she fled to Bulawayo, but she now had a heavy cross in Binga.

Perhaps somewhere he had a family and a son he treasured. If he had, then it was good for him, but she couldn't stop blaming the Almighty for pairing her with an inconsiderate, heartless man. Within a week in Bulawayo, she sold some household furniture and bought an air ticket to the United Kingdom. Pursuing an eye-for-an-eye approach, she left for London with neither the army nor her husband's knowledge.

For three years, she was in the UK. For three years, Binga Jochoma had no idea of her whereabouts. It was unfortunate she found no time to annul their marriage at the High Court before she left the country. In London, she was determined to marry any worthwhile man who sought her hand in marriage. In the process, she became prey to London's Mafia and libidinous men taking advantage of her longing for marriage. It came as a relief when she stumbled on Roderick Morris who harboured a religious truth she initially rejected as mundane, demonic and blasphemous. Sceptical and too scared to entertain blasphemous thoughts in her mind, at first she reacted to his convictions with suspicion and disgust, afraid to court God's wrath.

The new information Roderick imparted in her went against her biblical grain. Despite herself, she read what he brought her in the

name of love. He was a believer in the cave-man concept, that a hunter brought his lover game meat, the object of his hunt. Roderick brought her his academic knowledge, of Venus and the Neolithic societies, of sexual rituals in pre-scientific sanctuaries of Font de Gaume, Les Trois Frères, Niaux and the carven of Tuc d'Audoubert in Ariège. Of the female Chinese beneficent and compassionate deities Ma Tsu and Kuan Yin still widely worshipped in China, he talked. His research pointed to one thing: early civilisations across the globe worshipped female deities and respected women. Because he regarded sexual intimacy a reunion with God, Roderick Morris treated her like a goddess.

The material was factual and challenged her to embrace the new truth. Modern technological breakthroughs in radiocarbon dating techniques verified the papyrus scrolls as ancient and written in the initial centuries of the first millennium. There was scientific conviction the Gnostic Gospels pertained to the time of Jesus of Nazareth. Some reports purported that Nobel Prize winner Willard Libby, the scientist honoured for developing the radiocarbon dating technique, analysed the scrolls and endorsed them as authentic and compiled in the era of Jesus. The Dead Sea and the Coptic Scrolls as read with secret diaries of Sandro Botticelli and Sir Isaac Newton, among other historical notables, glorified sexual intimacy.

While First World societies gradually grasped the painful truth through televised debates and religious essays in the print media and academic presentations on the Gnostic gospels and the Dead Sea Scrolls awash on the Internet, her Africa was occupied with retrogressive politics; election rigging, barbaric tribal wars and the Darfur crisis. Outside politics, circumcision and female genital mutilation were topical.

The academic was passionate beyond words, and admirably successful. He drove a Porsche and an elegant Range Rover. In his company, she was a goddess. She hoped he would propose marriage. He never did. She did instead, hopeful she would exploit his fervent

hunger for her. He was vexed. He shook his head and regrettably said his family was racist and decried his association with black women.

She could've shown him the door, but reckoned the man was an important factor in her life and an objective man. If she shoved him out of her life, she would miss his knowledge that gave her a sense of importance as a woman, the comfort of his splendid cars, and his worshipful attitude towards her. After a week, he presented her with a terra cotta figurine from a pagan goddess cult. The figurine became her priceless possession. It appeared like an erotic figure for the expression of pervasive eroticism. He said it was a representation of Venus, the embodiment of feminine eroticism and fecundity.

After three years abroad, she returned to her parent's house in Bulawayo. Both her parents died from suffocation when they put a bucketful of embers to heat their bedroom through one winter night during her sojourn. Nomathemba, being an only child, inherited the house. After mourning her parents long buried by relatives, she found a teaching position at a local school, but the legal tenets of her marriage still bond her to Binga.

One night, the ex-commando came looking for her at the parental house. She noticed he had a better financial standing, far ahead of the country's soldiers, schoolteachers and headmasters getting paltry salaries. Initially, Binga told her he had become a merchant, which was vague. When she pressed him with questions, he stuttered and said he had become a gold buyer, an illegal buyer of the precious mineral, which required him to travel a lot to remote places. He said he would be absent most of the time from their new home in Bulawayo. She wanted to know if the army was still looking for him. He nodded.

She bore him two daughters. Nyanyadzi came a year after her return, while Rusitu came two and a half years later. She wanted her daughters to bear Christian names, but Binga named them after two tumbling rivers in Chimanimani, a remote mountainous district tacked in the eastern corner of the country. Both rivers had their

sources in Mawenje, a grey range of mountains. Mount Binga and Peza were monumental on this range.

Nyanyadzi died when she was three months old. Rusitu followed suit at four months on this day, 28 November. Both strikingly resembled each other and were beautiful, and both, she believed, died mysteriously. On their first daughter's death certificate, a doctor wrote she succumbed to complications arising from bronchial pneumonia. Rusitu's certificate stated she died from malaria. Nomathemba understood doctors were cognisant of the laws of the land, which didn't acknowledge witchcraft.

Before Rusitu died, Binga used to be responsible and fatherly. After the children's death, he emotionally drifted from her and became verbally abusive towards her. He was irritable and constantly called her names when angry, warthog, bitch, owl, witch, whore, never running out of vile epithets to wither her spirit. The marriage degenerated to something resembling the relationship between a master and a house cleaner. She prayed for God's intervention in her marriage. The abuse worsened. Now she was thin and walked with her head bowed in dejection. Had she been financially independent, she could've divorced him. She clung to the hope that someday the cordial man she married before a priest ten years ago would resurface in Binga.

Now, as she stared at the portraits of her late children, it occurred to her hope was a sundry name for Hell's vestibule. Ever since Binga Jochoma disappeared from the house a month ago, which was his custom, a feeling of inadequacy plagued her. She pitied him for his failure to grasp the complimentary concept of *yin* and *yang*, light and darkness, the female and the male. If he understood that *husbands ought to love their wives, and women ought to respect their husbands*, he would revere her, his God-given chalice. Only then, would God look at him favourably and cause him to discover his purpose in life, and he would prosper.

She cupped her breasts in her hands and reminded herself for the umpteenth time hope was vain and she had to root her trust in the God who smote the sycamore trees with frost, the vines with hail, swine with dementia, and offered up sheep to lightning. This God would prevail on what had entered her husband. However, ever since she lost her children, her belief in God fizzled.

In her preoccupation as she sat on the chair, she scolded herself for marrying Binga when she should've married her childhood sweetheart and schoolmate. At twenty-nine years old, she wouldn't have been dejected. However, her childhood sweetheart was out of work and struggling to feed himself and put a roof over his head. The ex-commando and DRC war veteran had come at an opportune time when she needed to get married. Soon after leaving college, most of her peers had married and borne children.

Her hands slid down her belly, past her navel. A vivid and engaging montage of her numerous erotic escapades in the UK ran through her mind. Though self-abuse soiled her self-esteem, she touched herself. After several minutes, she jerked and moaned, a fire rising within her, devouring her tiredness and ennui, and taking undisputed possession of her being. Yet something seemed to be stifling the fire. She rose and hurried in faltering steps into the bedroom for her battery-powered dildo.

Chapter 16

Noises from the rustic stairway from level 38 reached Binga and pulled him from his DRC war reflections. The six-man cooperative was coming up.

His wristwatch said it was 9 pm. If he ascended that very moment, he would emerge any time during the day on 29 November. He had descended and would now ascend for his exaltation. Everything pointed to it.

Although he was thousands of kilometres from Europe, never before had he felt within reach of grabbing the object of his longing. Excitement raced his imagination. He saw himself in the hurly bustle of Paris. A taxi whisked him down Rue de Rivoli and Rue Castiglione. He alighted at the Tuileries Gardens, entered the monumental garden through the splendid northern entrance and strolled across its breadth only to exit at the southern side and take another taxi to the Musée de l'Armée, to stare at the sculpture of the Napoleonic grenadier.

This trip, seemingly aimless, was necessary for him to get a feel of Paris as he mingled with genuine tourists. It accorded him the opportunity to check if he wasn't rousing suspicion with his movements. In the Army Museum, he would perform a disappearing act, just to test the juju on French soil. The next day he would go for the haul in the Musée du Louvre. After visiting the hermit in Chipinge, he would meticulously plan the practical details of the robbery and the safest way to transact the *Mona Lisa* with the New York dealer.

Binga waited anxiously in the darkness, his eyes in the direction of the opening from the level below. His heart beat faster. On the spur of killing, the would-be victims could kill him instead. Figuring he was breathing rapidly, he held his breath. With his breathing steady, he would be more precise in his strikes and judgments.

Minutes passed. Grunting with effort, one by one the men emerged onto Level 37 and beamed the darkness around them with their torches. Their boots crushed loose ore as they trudged away in single file in the opposite direction. They headed towards a planned staircase hewn in the earth's crust.

Binga studied the men like a predator eyeing a herd of wild beasts for a weakling. They were visibly tired. In old torn clothing, they appeared like victims of a mudslide recently dug up. He tried to think like the men. What security logistics would they employ in such a situation? A man he envisaged as the team's giant walked in front, swinging a machete. Tall and stout, he struck Binga as a weightlifter; his neck was thick and his shoulders were broad and hefty. A man of average height, age and weight walked in the middle. Unlike the others, the man didn't carry anything in his hands or on his back.

Binga noticed it was the same man the team brought the ore to for pounding. The man definitely carried the gold. The other machete was in the hand of a tall man bringing the rear. Pillars eventually obstructed his sight of the men.

Now and then bumping into pillars, Binga walked in the opposite direction until he reached the eastern wall of the underground vault. He groped his way to a burrowing resembling the mouth of a cave and entered it. Inside the opening, he switched on the torch on his forehead and looked up. The glare of the torch caught an amateur wire rope with wooden rungs about half a metre apart. Heaving up, rung by painful rung, the ladder perilously took him to the next level, which he reached ahead of the team. In the darkness he waited for their emergence onto Level 36 from the mine's standard staircase. After about fifteen minutes, their torch beams appeared in the distance. The men spoke in low contented tones.

From their primitive security formation, he was sure they had realised a weighty gold nugget. As they headed to the other traditional route to the next level, Binga made his way towards another

dangerous exit burrowing most diggers shunned. Unlike the descent, the way up taxed a climber and tortured his body.

About nine hours later, when the sun was breaking from the eastern horizon, Binga was about to emerge from the earth's crust through the mine's breather. His biceps, triceps and leg muscles hurt and his fingers were bleeding.

The air became fresher as he edged to the surface. Above him, a small hole revealed a clear sky. Admitting a vertical ascent was punitive, but in this case profitable, he was set to climb out of the breather when a hand suddenly grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him out. Binga found himself surrounded by a group of hoodlums. The six-man cooperative was about ten minutes behind him. The hand that pulled him out held his collar in an asphyxiating grip, its bearer behind Binga. Having spent several hours underground, the sun's glare blinded Binga.

"Give us the gold," the man behind Binga ordered. "Hand over all the nuggets, or you're dead."

Binga squinted and counted the men in woollen hats and bandanas. Four stood in front of him with knives and an axe big enough to put down a buffalo. The muggers were between twenty-five and thirty years old. All were within arm's reach. Feigning terror, he pointed at his trousers and quickly slid his right hand in his trousers, bringing their eyes down. Binga grabbed his axe by the blade and pulled it out, tossing it into the air and catching it by the handle as it spun in a semi-circle. The small axe descended in a flash, the blade homing in the left temple of the man in front of him wielding the big axe.

At war, platoons exerted maximum effort towards destroying the enemy's most devastating batteries and the men behind them. Binga heard the tip of the blade hitting against the man's skull. The man cried and staggered backwards, the counter-attack taking the group by surprise as the men sprang backwards, recoiling from the horror. Binga knew the gang wasn't used to being counter-attacked. He was

in the hands of amateur robbers, and would've a field day before his quarry emerged.

Abruptly, the ex-commando turned; the collar of his shirt tearing. He swung the axe in a wide horizontal arch. The blade broke ribs and sunk in the left lung of the man who pulled him from the breather and still held on to a shirt tearing into an irregular ribbon. Air escaped loudly from the punctured lung. The knife wielding men gained composure and charged at him, but already two from their ranks were spurting blood and falling. They froze and stepped backwards. Like a catapulted eagle, Binga sprang at the one in their middle, the axe held high, and sank the axe's blade in the man's right shoulder. Binga tumbled with the man, the weight of his body slamming the man's head to the ground. The mugger lay still, his eyes rolling, as the ex-military man rolled away from him, his weapon still in his hand.

The springing, axing, falling and rolling were clean acts of one play that culminated in Binga standing on his feet again. The last two men standing gawked at him, turned and fled the scene in different directions. If he had ample time in his hands, he could've chased one of them and mowed him in mid-stride with a cut to the lower spinal code, just for the fun of it. However, he was on a mission and emotions rarely drove him.

Though the fight had started and ended in less than a minute, three men lay bleeding profusely near the breather. The man he struck in the left temple pleaded in dying cries to Binga to take him to hospital. The one he struck in the right shoulder cried and grunted the loudest. The man with the perforated lung gurgled blood. By the second, their agonised animation diminished. After about five minutes, none of them made audible cries. The men shuddered involuntarily, almost imperceptibly.

He began searching them, dipping his hands in their pockets and underwear and feeling the hems of their clothes. He was swift, thorough and spirited. When he finished searching the third one, four

gold nuggets lay in his hands. Estimating the weight of the nuggets in his hands, Binga mused he had just helped himself to a total of about forty-five grams, and gladly pocketed the gold. Forty-five grams was a big haul worth a little over two thousand US dollars on the black market. The gods and the ancestors were paving his passage to the Louvre Museum. Expecting a bigger haul, he crouched at the breather, the stained axe in his hand, and peered down.

The team's giant led the cooperative up; he could tell from the clank of his machete as it hit against the walls of the spiralling burrowing. Binga foresaw himself doubling the quantity of the gold on his person. While the gods favoured him, it was time to optimise and capitalise.

It seemed to take the group forever to reach the surface. This was an ambush consisting of waiting, and waiting correlated to patience. Binga wasn't patient, but he resisted the urge to descend into the breather. Though the three dead men were no longer his occupation, he was glad they'd scare away prospective miners or other muggers who approached the point. The blood around the breather was simply unbearable. Nevertheless, he kept a wary eye and ear for people who might come to the entry point.

Finally, the leader's head surfaced. Binga grabbed with one hand the collar of his shirt and tried to drag him out. The man clung to a rope in resistance, but since he was in the hole, he was in too awkward a position to fight. Binga tightened his grip, which became a life-threatening cincture around the man's neck. No word or sound escaped from his gaping mouth as he dropped the machete down the breather. A man below him yelled in pain. Pulsating veins stood on Binga's forearm as he pulled the man clear and away from the breather. Binga's right hand bearing the axe came down, cutting a deep wound above his left ear. When the man protectively brought his hands up, the ex-commando leaned sideward and struck him in the left knee. The man fell, wordlessly; Binga's death grip was still around his neck.

Terrified screams came from the breather. From the corner of his eye, he saw a head jut from the breather, and let go the leader's throat. The stricken man gasped loudly and clutched his throat. The army trained Binga against turning his back to a potentially harmful man. He axed the man's other knee and sprang to the breather, repeating the same attack on the emerging man. The second man was lean and not visibly armed. He pulled him out without much straining. Three swings of the axe, one above his left ear and two to his knees, immobilized the man. Letting go the man, Binga peered down the breather. The rest of the team was retreating underground. He had invested many hours to rob them and they were vanishing into the underground vaults with *his* haul.

Binga grabbed the lean man by the back of his neck and dragged him to the breather as if to cast him head first to his death.

"Tell them to come up or you're dead!" he growled.

The man was speechless for a moment. "Ishmael!" he called. "Godwin... Osborne, please come up... or he'll kill me... please!" It was a frantic plea.

Binga thought the plea wasn't desperate enough. He cut another wound above the one in his head. It didn't bleed much because of the one an inch below it oozing blood into the breather. However, the effect was exactly what Binga sought.

"He's killing me! Please come out!"

Binga pulled the man from the breather and returned to crouch at the opening.

A man was coming up. It was the man he wanted, the gold bearer.

"Let me give you what we've, brother," he quacked as he inched upwards, fear, toiling and the torturous ascent having drained him of strength. "Let me give you what we've, brother," he repeated.

"Only this one man is surfacing!" Binga ordered into the breather. "The rest remain where you are!"

He pulled the man out by his neck and pushed him ruthlessly to the ground. The man fell among bloodied men and shook with fright. He dug into his right hip pocket and held out a small petroleum jelly container. Binga snatched the container from his hand. It was extraordinarily heavy. Certainly, it had the precious metal. He pocketed it and pointed into the breather, an order to those who still could to go underground.

Only two men could heed the order, the man who gave him the gold and the one who called out the others. The giant from the six men cooperative lay dying. Binga could tell from his far spaced groans that it was a question of minutes. When the second man's head vanished from the surface, Binga pulled the giant to the breather and pushed him down. The big man tobogganed headfirst the breather. The three dead men followed him down. As Binga slid the axe into his trousers, turned and trotted away, he knew the giant and the three dead men were knocking everyone down the chute-like hole down to Level 2, via *Face-off*.

From Patchway, he would see Matipa and his son at Sakis Mine. Now that he had the airfare to France, he intended to spoil them a little before travelling to Chipinge to see the naked Sufi hermit at the confluence in the forest. If the mystic man wanted ordinary human blood, Binga would furnish him with it. If he wanted albino blood, Binga would find it for him.

He risked arrest and the gallows if he continued to roam the goldfield. Once he robbed the French museum, he would sit pretty and retire. No, he would take neither Matipa nor Nomathemba abroad; they'd remind him of the poverty and strife he endured for years. Only Peza would accompany him overseas. Abroad, he would find exotic love and remarry. An exotic stepmother would take care of Peza. A cunning man with money always found love and could marry into any race or family.

However, he wasn't entirely heartless, he told himself. He would buy Nomathemba a mansion in a posh suburb of Bulawayo, and

divorce her. With time, the schoolteacher would find love, learn to live without him and gradually forget about him. Matipa was entrepreneurial. He was going to rent a grocer's shop for her at a rural business centre in Chimanmani. A shop owner he spoke to charged him a paltry fifty US dollars a month in rental. Binga would pay the proprietor rentals for two years in advance, fully stock the shop with groceries and purchase her a homestead near the business centre. Though it was a humble shop, it would accord her a steady income. With time, like Nomathemba, he was sure Matipa would also find love.

He was almost certain Matipa would diversify into horticulture; floribundas were her passion. Oddly, he thought, she loved roses more than she loved him, little wonder she had dreamt of thirteen rosebuds planted in his head. Virginal Gillian crossed his mind as he ran. By thinking he could return to Sakis Mine and then consult the Sufi hermit before he could lay his eyes and perhaps his hands on Gillian, he knew he had fooled himself. Her youthful and elfin pulchritude arrested his imagination.

Sophistication and intelligence sat well together in a beautiful woman. Though he hadn't been to a university or college, he felt he was complicated enough to warrant a woman of Gillian's calibre in his life, especially in the meantime when his pocket limited his tastes. For the first time, Binga Jochoma considered marrying and living with Gillian abroad. The sophisticated university undergraduate was worth visiting immediately.

Chapter 17

Because most elders of the apostolic sect deduced the arrival of the demon was imminent, they agreed to attend a caucus meeting *Madzibaba* Tinashe convened under a shady mango tree in the compound of Sakis Mine. Had the meeting been strictly for the elders alone, the elders would've deemed it sublime and held it at the sect's shrine on the hill.

Owing to the magnitude of the threat, *Madzibaba* Tinashe asked the village Chief, the Headman and all interested people in the vicinity to convene under the tree at 11 am on 29 November. The Chief availed his octogenarian uncle to stand in for him. Apart from the representative, no one else from the community attended because non-members of the sect scoffed at the prophecies. Many non-believers thronged the shrine to satisfy curiosity and for entertainment.

By now, all the major prophecies were common knowledge at the mine and throughout the surrounding gold claims and farmlands. Most people invited to the meeting brushed the prediction of the looming devil as a fallacy. Altogether fourteen people assembled under the tree some minutes before the stipulated hour. Twelve of the men were the sect's elders, all in their flowing white garments. Humbly sitting on the ground, the men had girded their loins and legs in white cloths seemingly like loose napkins. The thirteenth man was the chief's representative who sat on a low wooden stool, constantly stuffing his nostrils with snuff to the disdain of the believers. *Madzibaba* Remegio was the fourteenth figure. Though he was single and too youthful for the elders to refer to him as a man, or an elder for that matter, he was a teenager driven by religious zeal, as most people understood him. His office as the prophet's acolyte appeared to be his visa to the gathering.

Madzibaba Tinashe stood up. “Elders and the Chief’s representative, I greet you. I’m convinced Heaven will reward all of you for sparing time to heed *Madzibaba* Jatropa’s prophecy and possibly deliberate as men of flesh and blood on how we could protect ourselves from the danger in the offing,” he said. “Most of us heard the prophecy direct from the divine messenger’s lips. He said a demon was coming to Sakis Mine. The demon could be on the horizon. I felt it was improper for us to fold our arms and await the arrival of the menace as if it’s Father Christmas bringing us festive gifts. I leave the floor to contributors. May the peace of our Lord dwell with you.”

“Amen,” the believers said collectively.

Remegio stood up and inhaled deeply. “Elders, I greet you. I don’t stand here to belittle *Madzibaba* Tinashe’s efforts and concern. Any man fearful of God must have a heart and should be considerate of others. I suppose it’s out of his love and concern for *Madzimai* Matipa’s family and Sakis Mine at large that the elder convened this meeting. May the peace of the Lord abide in you.”

“Amen!”

“When the Messiah was about to ascend,” the teenager continued, “what did He say to his disciples? He said the world would know them because of their love for each other.”

The elders nodded their heads.

Remegio adjusted the shawl on his left shoulder. “I applaud *Madzibaba* Tinashe for an exhibition of such love. However, God’s favourites are those who believe and trust in his prophecies, not exhibitors of anything, be it machismo, fear or love. From the onset, may it be understood *Madzibaba* Jatropa, a man led by the Spirit, didn’t sanction this meeting as we can all tell from his absence.”

The elders exchanged baffled glances.

Remegio raised his voice to a sermonic pitch. “When the Israelites faced the Red Sea, had their lives ended?” he paused dramatically. “No, is the answer.”

"It only appeared as if their lives had ended," added *Madzibaba* Tinashe.

"Behind them Pharaoh's innumerable army was closing in on them," went on the teenager. "Horses neighed amid hooting war cries from Egyptian soldiers whose swords were out of their scabbards. None of the cornered people knew God had charted a path for the tribe across the tumultuous sea. May the peace of the Lord abide in you."

"Amen!"

Remegio shook his head mournfully. "This gathering is an exhibition to the Chief's representative of our mistrust in God." He stopped again to inhale, and continued with a hint of anger in his voice. "If the Archangel Michael cannot defend us from this looming demon, then it was by the power of unknown angels that the walls of Jericho fell. If indeed by the power of unknown angels Jericho fell, then to these militant angels we must turn. If such angels exist, do we turn to them now or after we've proved Michael a failure? May the peace of the Lord help your unbelief."

The responsive *Amen* from the elders was weak.

As the teenager sat down, the Chief's uncle laughed and sniffed more snuff. Confused murmurs ensued among the elders.

Madzibaba Tinashe rose again. "Let it be understood I'm not belittling or demeaning the power or existence of the grand archangel. To do so is foolish and tantamount to disbelieving the existence of God and Heaven. At the same time, we all ought to know death has no recourse. Going by what the Spirit said to us through *Madzibaba* Jatropa, I shudder to tell you in the presence of the Chief's representative that the Devil has concluded most of us, especially you, *Madzibaba* Remegio."

Some heads nodded in agreement.

Madzibaba Tinashe continued. "Plainly speaking, the Devil shall manifest in the form of a man and roam this area and farmlands.

We're in the shadow of the said days. May the peace of our Lord dwell with you."

"Amen!"

Remegio immediately jumped to his feet as the elder sat. "*Madzibaba* Tinashe's utterances are a direct call to us to abandon our faith. It wasn't by seeking other gods that the Jews triumphed at the Red Sea. Elders, I'm a man of God not given to rude remarks, but it seems the demon sent an advance party in the form of an evil spirit now taking residence in *Madzibaba* Tinashe. Only a possessed mind can ever doubt the power and fury of Archangel Michael. My appeal to the elder is brotherly and heartily. I pray his words shouldn't turn the relics of Baba Johannes in his tomb. Pray for forgiveness, *Madzibaba* Tinashe. For refuge, elders, may you abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

"Amen."

The elder jumped to his feet. "Though your words are an obvious evil prayer against me, I wish to remind you fatherly, Remegio, that you were warned to stay nude indoors."

Most of the elders nodded.

The elder went on. "The prophet said the demon shall reign and God would send a vulture as a prelude to the demon's arrival. He said the day wasn't far into the future. It's only through practising caution on your part, *Madzibaba* Remegio, not the intervention of Archangel Michael, that you might see the future."

The majority of the elders nodded again.

"Mark my words this day the twenty-ninth of November." *Madzibaba* Tinashe threatened, adjusting the shawl draped on his left shoulder. "By defying reason, with your hands you're digging your grave, Remegio."

The teenager shook his head stubbornly, his anger and resentment of the elder's understanding of the problem and its resolution lurid but religiously toned down by the laboured and selective use of peroration.

The elder continued his voice deliberately supple. “You’re young and issuing from boyhood, Remegio. If elders were to follow your depraved understanding of prophecies and matters spiritual, we’d all perish. The spirit offers us guidance, but as ordained elders, we must find the passage our Father chartered for us through the Red Sea. Could other contributors address the meeting? The caucus is turning into a verbal contest between the youngster and me. One of us, it appears, is the fowler. The prophet urged us to pray for deliverance from the snare of the fowler.” He sat down.

The teenager sprang to his feet, apparently fuming. “If at all we must think and refrain from harkening to the Father of Spirits, then this meeting is pagan and against God. My understanding of faith is belief beyond thinking or compromise. If ever we must think, we stray from the realm of faith. The prophet gave a prophecy; all we can do now is act accordingly. If I sound offensive, forgive my poor choice of words. I pray we find habitation in God’s Word.”

“Amen,” three elders responded.

“Against the fowler,” Remegio continued, “we were warned, but when do we make God’s truth our shield and buckler?”

The elder rose again and stared at Remegio for a while. “It’s dangerous for a man to shut his mind. To shut a thinking mind is to manufacture an idiot. Utterly resign yourself to the Spirit at your own peril. Beware; your hard-heartedness could be a deliberate invitation of martyrdom. Such martyrs consign themselves to perdition because *cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree*. Suicides don’t enter Heaven. May God deliver us from people of Remegio’s mentality.”

“Amen!”

“God dictated it word by word to Moses,” Remegio retorted, seated, “*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*” He paused. “The Bible further says: *Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.*”

No one took the floor, but the elders murmured amongst themselves; some heads shaking, some nodding. Confusion reigned

for several minutes as an opinion rift developed and tempers flared with rising voices. Without rising, many elders said prophecies were divine and required meditation for balance and implementation, which was vague in the beginning.

Elaboration appeared to point out it was stupid and vain to attempt to stop the mind from thinking. The differences erupted again, and an argument ensued. Finally, the elders agreed those who thought themselves thinkers should strategise escape routes, and the faithful should blindly adhere to the prophecies, both schools to their own good or detriment.

Those in agreement with Remegio seemed outnumbered. All the same, the teenager's attitude towards *Madzibaba* Tinashe irked the elder into rising. The Chief's representative shook his head, rose and walked out of the meeting. Everyone regrettably watched him walked away with his head bowed in embarrassment until he vanished behind some huts on his way out of the compound. The meeting was speechless.

Madzibaba Tinashe, eyeing the teenager icily, hawked up a mouthful of phlegm, held it in his mouth for a long while and then spat the gobbet in one long drip to the ground and left the gathering in a hoof. Eight elders rose and followed him, making curt gestures at Remegio and three elders, the remaining men. The irate men took the direction of the shrine in the hills.

As *Madzibaba* Remegio followed them with his eyes, describing them as sworn non-believers and enemies of God, something in the sky caught his attention. It was a circling, solitary eagle in the foreground of a sea-blue sky with sparse puffy clouds. The bird dived and came to perch on a shrub near their mango tree. Its wingspan was longer than that of an eagle. The bird was cumbersome.

The men under the tree followed the teenager's astonished gaze. The bird wasn't an eagle, scrutiny showed. The neck was distinctly long and featherless. They were looking at a vulture ogling at them.

Chapter 18

Aware the charms and juju he relied upon disturbed babies, Binga Jochoma carefully avoided public transport, shunning a repeat of the hysteria he roused on the bus from Gokwe. From Patchway Mine, he hitchhiked to the small farming town of Chegutu via Chakari, a large-scale functional gold mine. A lorry carrying crates of eggs and live chicken in cages stopped for him about four kilometres from Patchway. Fortunately, two passengers sat alongside the driver and he had to sit at the back with the chicken; otherwise, he was too soiled and smelly to sit in the cab.

An unregistered gold buyer in the farming town relieved him of the precious metal he was carrying. The price per gram was rewarding. The yield, about five thousand American dollars, was enough to buy a good second-hand Toyota Mark II from Japan at landing cost. Such a vehicle would dazzle his workmates and irk his employers at Sakis Mine, more so Mr Gilchrist Keneas, the Afro-European mill manager with the potential to charm with his jeep any woman in the compound if he so wished. Though a Mark II didn't necessarily outclass the manager, at least it would prove Binga Jochoma was a man of substance in a position beneath him.

He dissuaded himself from heading to Harare and buying a car. He had to remain focused and stick to his plan: spoiling big time his customary and legitimate wife before flying to Paris. Of the opinion women were more impressed with what they saw on the outside than character, he dressed to appear gentlemanly, and to impress. He visited an open-air flea market to buy clothes. A backyard barber gave him a clean shave. He overpaid the barber and asked to use the bathroom. When he walked out of the barber's premises, he was in new clothes and had washed his face and armpits. He cast his dirty clothes into a roadside rubbish fire.

A private car took him to Kadoma, a distance of thirty-three kilometres along the Harare-Bulawayo highway. If he had added twenty-two kilometres southwards, he could've returned to Sakis Mine. In a taxi, he rode past Kadoma Show Grounds, ascended the Rio Tinto Great Dyke escapement and, at 11:15 am alighted at PaGomo Heights, a quiet mountainside garden lodge and tavern in the outskirts of the mining town of Kadoma.

After taking a bath and a three-course meal, he got into a striped baseball cap, denim jacket and a matching pair of trousers. A taxi took him to Ivy's residence. He hoped she would be home after informing all the employees at the mine of her intention to take a day off and rest on this day, 29 November. The young woman with a forced British disposition resided in a ground floor flat in lacklustre Westview, a middle-income suburb. He knocked at her door.

"Who's it!" she called from inside.

"Akar."

"Akar? What can I do for you?"

"I'm seeking a favour, Ivy. Won't you open the door?"

She opened the door, leaving the security chain hooked, and peered out in a mini-skirt and T-shirt. "I can't believe you're here, Akar." She was shocked. "What can I do for you?"

From a roll of hundred-dollar banknotes, he peeled two. "Sorry to come without notice, but I knew you'd be off duty today."

She looked at the two notes and stared at him. "So?"

"Can you take this amount to my wife?" He drew a twenty-dollar note from a hip pocket and added it to the two hundred dollars. "Twenty bucks is for the trouble."

"I'm pretty shocked. Who told you I live here?"

"This is a very small town."

Ivy frowned, took the money and closed the door.

There was no way he could reveal that some months ago he trailed her to the flat intending to take her out for dinner. How could he tell her that though he found her thin and ugly, he yearned to

discover her erotic side? However, when he followed her, the realisation a relationship with the mine's receptionist, apparently Mr Gilchrist Keneas girlfriend, could jeopardise his employment, restrained him when he caught up with her at her flat. She walked with the vivacity of a prostitute on the prowl. When the distance between them narrowed, and he had an undisturbed good look at her from behind, he saw that she had the thinness of a famine victim. Her figure was dispiriting and graceless. She was unworthy of the risk.

Substantive women, celebrated marvels, came graced with thick thighs, bulbous breasts and pendulous bottoms. The stamina to balance heavy loads on their heads, to hand-grind grains for hours into meal-meal or butter, and walk long distances to fetch water couldn't be expected from a woman of Ivy's physique. Such sickeningly thin women weren't even acceptable as compensation to settle murder disputes.

Binga rode back to the lodge to rest and think. At PaGomo Heights, he thought of Matipa, Nomathemba, Peza and Gillian. Matipa and Nomathemba, he definitely wouldn't take abroad; they weren't exportable material. Gillian he could. Without being sickeningly slim, she had the figure and potential to become a marvellous supermodel. Someday she could make the cover of *Vogue* or *People* magazine.

Chapter 19

From about 11 am on 29 November, Matipa stood at the window and looked at the gathering of elders and the acolyte under the mango tree. Now it was almost midday. Routine monthly maintenance service had brought the gold mill to a halt, suspending the perpetual thuds that were the order of life at the mine.

She knew her family was the subject of the meeting because *Madzibaba* Tinashe called at her house two days earlier and informed her he would convene a meeting for their protection. His concern and worry over her family apparent, he said as an elder it was within his powers to convene such a meeting at the earliest convenience and as close as possible to her house, for the working out of a practicable strategy. Though he said he didn't mean to alarm her, he made it clear it was sensible to expect the worst so that the community could put in place a counter measure. The elder's objectives were clear; if the demon came in the body of a man, then men could fight it. If it came as a spirit, it was up to *Madzibaba* Jatropa to keep it at bay.

However, the prophet's absence at the meeting was conspicuous. Had he availed himself, surely the meeting would've taken a different character. She felt *Madzibaba* Tinashe should've invited her, at least as a non-contributing listener, but she was a woman and not privy to a gathering of men. The sect's ethics stipulated a woman had no place in the company of men. Her presence would've been taboo and immoral.

Through the window, she witnessed the arrival of all the men, including the Chief's representative. True to the elder's word, the gathering met, with *Madzibaba* Tinashe moderating by default. With a brief speech, he opened the meeting. Though he wasn't prophetic, he had vast oratory skills to sway the others.

As the men deliberated under the tree, she derived a sense of protection from their sainthood as ordained elders; certain no demon could overpower or outmanoeuvre them. However, the Chief's representative marred the gathering with his presence and snuff. She saw the elders' mouths open and close, and their hands make gestures and adjust the shawls on their shoulders, but the gathering was out of earshot. Though she felt secure from their presence and proximity, it rather disturbed her to see that *Madzibaba* Tinashe and overzealous Remegio were the only contributors. It appeared the two were arguing. Remegio seemed to jut now and then in counter-offensive. She continued to watch through the window, finding offence in the teenager's actions, but helpless about it. Disapproval murmurs and *Amen* choruses reached her.

After about half an hour, to her dismay, *Madzibaba* Tinashe rose, honked and spat phlegm in the most repulsive manner she had ever witnessed. The Chief's representative, the seasoned sect elder and eight others walked out of the meeting gesturing disappointment. It baffled her that the convenor was abandoning a crucial meeting to fanatical Remegio and three passive elders.

The men who remained were a fallacy of the elder's intentions. She believed they had no right to discuss her family or welfare. She detested *Madzibaba* Tinashe for walking away. Apparently, Remegio had erred by arguing with the elder. She guessed the teenager had sought to humiliate the senior, but thought the elder should've stayed and fought the boy, with clenched fists if need be. If the elder chose to be fatherly, he should've looked for a rawhide whip and thrashed him reformatory-style across the buttocks. Distorting or pervading the right thing was among one of sin's definitions. She would inform the prophet of Remegio's unbecoming and sinful behaviour. It was high time Prophet Jatrophia clipped the boy's wings.

She began to hate Remegio, but hated the elder more for walking away. At the next shrine meeting, she would confess to the sin of hatred, which would lead to an explanation of her disappointment.

Not all the congregants would see the teenager in good light. Indeed Prophet Jatropa would find another acolyte, suitable material this time, not the delusional dropout. By dropping out of school, he irked his father and brought dishonour to his family.

Despite the sad development, Matipa eventually drew solace from the belief that nothing in a believer's life happened by chance. Whatever was in her best interest had taken centre-stage at the meeting. She was under the eyes of God and thanked the Almighty for driving *Madzibaba* Tinashe and the other elders away. She also gave thanks for the few who stayed.

She was about to leave the window when she noticed that Remegio and the three elders were looking frightfully at something on the nearby shrub. She looked in the direction and her heart sank. A staring vulture was perched on the shrub. Was this the prophesied prelude to the calamity? She gaped. What was she waiting for? This was the sign. Her legs trembled.

Peza, she panicked. *Where's my son?* She turned sharply and looked into the lounge, afraid the imminent demon had mysteriously drawn the boy outside the dwelling. Peza was lounging and watching a repeat of the Spanish soccer league on television.

She sighed with relief. She had to find a safe haven for her son, at least provisionally, but in the meantime, whatever was coming would've to kill her before it could reach her son. With her life, she would defend his, she resolved. Reconsidering, she resolved to summon Archangel Michael. In a spiritual warfare, material intervention was idiotic.

For the prayer to be solemn, she needed to be in her religious regalia. She was undecided between praying in her ordinary clothes or the sect's garments when three rapid raps came on the main door facing away from the gathering. Despite herself and the assurance she was ever in the eyes of God and Baba Johannes, she stared at the door and shook. She looked at Peza. The boy was at his feet and looking at her petrified. She suspected he could see her fear. Nothing

in her world indicated she was under divine protection. Ever since her conversion many years ago, she hadn't seen any angel to vouch for their existence. Her eyes clouded with tears.

"Hide in the wardrobe," she whispered to him, at the same time making frantic gestures in the direction of the bedroom.

Peza ran into the bedroom and closed the inner door behind him.

Matipa tiptoed to the main door and peered out through a crack, expecting to see a swarthy giant or some mean-looking personality. A part of her mind expected someone visibly ghoulish, a mutant of some sort, at worst two-headed, at least a possessed albino. From childhood, she was prejudiced against albinos. Another part expected a handsome man dressed like a bridegroom. The Holy Bible described the Devil as smart, cunning and good-looking.

Squinting, she couldn't believe her eyes. Ivy stood on the threshold.

Matipa sighed loudly, clutching her chest as the raps came again. She unlatched the door and pulled it open, but quickly slammed it shut and bolted it. It was possible the demon was in the human form of a person of her familiarity. She peered out again. Ivy, or her semblance, had stepped away from the door and looked aghast.

"Who're you?" Matipa asked.

"What kind of a question is that, Mrs Muja?" The visitor shrugged, bewildered. "Didn't you see me?"

"It's not a good day to be seen visiting." She wasn't sure what to say next. The visitor's voice, appearance and demeanour were certainly those of the receptionist. Driving her away would be gross. Reason dictated she interrogated her. "Sorry if I sound rude, but how do I know it's really you?"

The visitor shrugged again and made a face. "Do I suddenly look like someone else in your eyes?"

"I won't let you in unless you convince me."

"Of course, it's me. Open the door, please. I need to go."

"How can I trust you? Say Jesus Christ is Lord."

Ivy frowned and laughed despite herself.

"I'm very serious. Say it or go away."

"*Jesus Christ is Lord*," the visitor parroted.

Matipa was relieved. She unbolted the door and pulled it open.

"How're you, Mrs Muja. Two hundred dollars from your husband," Ivy said, extending a hand bearing two American banknotes. "He gave me the money a while ago in Kadoma. I was supposed to be home, but Mr Keneas called and requested me to come and do some urgent month-end reports. "

Matipa stared at the money. "When is he coming? Did he tell you where he was going?" The questions shot out of her mouth in quick succession, betraying the unsettled woman within her.

"He only said I should give you this money and walked away."

"My husband knows where *you* live in Kadoma?"

She made a countenance like one about to vomit. "I don't even understand how he came to know my flat."

Matipa took the money, two crisp hundred-dollar banknotes. "Thank you. Sorry. I'm sure you found my behaviour weird."

Ivy nodded. "You must be under a lot of stress. Are you alright?"

"I'm reasonably coping under the circumstances. Once my husband arrives, we're leaving. I can't stand feeling desperate and unwanted here."

"I wish I could help." Ivy looked at Matipa's feet. "I don't see Mr GK and AK reversing the dismissal. If anything, I see them calling the riot police to expel your husband should he try to cause trouble." She looked up at her. "In all honesty, I feel sorry for you, Mrs Muja."

"Don't be sorry for us." She grinned. "If we must leave the mine, then it's God-bidden. Prophet Jatropha has never said empty words. We'll be rich."

Ivy was visibly offended. She turned and sauntered away towards the gold mill beyond which stood the mine office. Matipa frowned and nearly spat in contempt as she watched Ivy swinging her fundament impressed into a silken mini-skirt. Matipa closed the door.

She turned and leaned against it, cursing the unknown repeatedly through gritted teeth and bated breath, regretting speaking words of faith to a heathen, a despiser of the apostolic sect's spiritual founder.

Outside, Matipa heard Remegio and the three elders sing a song inviting Joshua to watch over the land. The song and their voices pervaded her thoughts. In her imagination, she saw Joshua pleading with God to send Michael to destroy the walls of Jericho. The archangel would lead other angels in protecting her.

She was still leaning on the door and considering taking Peza to a former workmate in Chegutu fifty kilometres away for refuge, when another knock came on the door. The raps were far between and quiet. Perhaps the remaining men had sent someone to inform her of the outcome of the meeting. She unlatched the door and remotely rebuked herself for not taking the precaution of peering out through the gap. She stared at a male stranger. The man had retreated from the threshold and was now courteously kneeling on his hunches a couple of paces from the door, his hands clasped respectfully, his face turned from her.

She studied the visitor, a total stranger with an air of humility. He was about thirty-five, and athletic. In a new and matching corduroy black tweed jacket, cargo-pant trousers and matching suede shoes, he was strikingly different from the generality of the villagers and workers in the area. His humility and bearing were outstanding. It perplexed her why the stranger had elected to squat and turn his face from her as though he was a son-in-law speaking to his mother-in-law. Such courtesy and humility were from well-cultured rural people. The side of his face was clean-shaven, but his skin was weather-beaten.

He's probably lost and seeking directions, she thought. Matipa found it uncustomary to stand erect in the doorway when a respectable man was squatting. She sank on her knees, her hands clasped respectfully like his. However, when she looked over the men's shoulder at the apostolic men under the mango tree, she learnt

their number had more than doubled. Four trendily dressed men had joined Remegio and the elders still engaged in inviting Joshua to the land. The intruders squatted in a semi-circle around the believers. One of the men had a five-litre plastic container. Matipa supposed the container held ordinary water the bearer brought for sanctification. It was customary for non-believers to ask apostolic members, especially the sect's elders and prophets, to sanctify or bless various items for them. When she looked at the shrub, the vulture had gone.

"Madam, allow Bomani to greet you and introduce himself." The stranger spoke like a pope uttering a benediction. His bearing was priestly. "How're you, madam?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said, forcing a smile, and assuring herself there just was no need for her to be afraid of such a respectful man. However, half-formulated fear held her bowels. "But I can't help wondering who has called on us. You come at a terrible time—" She stopped abruptly, realising she was panicking and about to confide in the stranger.

"Bomani doesn't really understand you when you say he comes at a terrible time in your life. What Bomani knows is that terrible times are definitely coming."

"I insist, who am I talking to?"

"At birth his parents named him Bomani, which means warrior," he continued like a Catholic cardinal reading a canonical citation, his voice and its suppleness reflective of a man in total control of himself. "Later, respected figures initiated and gave him a second name—Kumanda, which means graveyard. In the land of snails, mists, mountains and diamonds where Bomani is coming from, he's a respected professional." He stopped briefly. "Madam, Bomani Kumanda is an old friend of Binga."

"Binga? I don't understand. I suppose you're lost."

"The warrior has travelled nearly five hundred kilometres to see him."

“I doubt if you’ve come to the right place. My husband is Akar, Akar Muja.”

“Bomani seeks Binga Jochoma. He’s come to the right place.”

“I’ve no knowledge of the man you seek. Who’s Binga?”

“Madam, you know as much as Bomani does that Binga is your husband.” His voice remained level. “Supposing you didn’t know, then you can as well learn now that Binga is his other name. You cannot shield him from Bomani. The warrior learnt Binga left two weeks ago. Where could he be?”

She refrained from believing this stranger. The last time she had heard someone speaking in tones like his was by Pope Benedict XVI when he presided at the beatification of Pope John Paul. She witnessed the ceremony live on satellite television. A twanging voice within her sought to convince her that this was the prophesied demon, but reason overrode it arguing the courteous man was lost and would not admit it.

“I’d want to help you, but by insisting wrongly my husband is Binga, you mislead yourself. I suggest you describe him a little.”

“God gave us everything except time.”

“May I know why you’re looking for this man?”

He smiled drily. “Is it out of vulgar curiosity that you ask, madam?”

“I’m not given to weird motivations. It isn’t my nature to be rude, but I don’t know how to tell you that you’re lost. There’s no one by that name in this compound. Kindly go and look for this Binga elsewhere. I’m sorry.”

He laughed, a dramatic ha-ha-ha. “You give Bomani the impression you’re not close to your husband.”

“I’ve already told you, *Binga* isn’t my husband. I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Bomani was fortunate enough to avoid marriage this far, but from what he hears, he’s tempted to believe a husband and a wife ought to confide in each other.” He paused and rubbed his hands

respectfully. “Because you ask many questions, Bomani’ll answer you with a question. It takes a missile to destroy ballistic missiles. You’ll excuse the exegeses, but when Abraham pursued the enemy to recover Lot and looted Jewish property, on his way back, he had the gracious honour to meet Melchizedek. The question Bomani poses to you, madam, is; did the two men, both divine and mysterious, merely exchange greetings and part? Be reminded Abraham was a friend of God. Both men were cut from the same cloth.”

She wanted to consider the question and its significance then answer him, but he had mentally toppled her. For a fraction of a minute, she couldn’t think rationally. Instead, she wondered if a demon could cite holy men in its speech. No, this man wasn’t the prophesied evil. When she was about to tell him he was incomprehensible, and incomprehensibility wouldn’t lead him to the man he was looking for, he turned his head and faced her. She nearly suffered a cardiac arrest.

For the first time she looked at his face squarely. His entire upper and lower front teeth were missing. Scars disfigured his face. His cheekbones were jutting, the jaws angular. His eyes were bloodshot, boring, cold and almost reptilian, rendering his gaze petulant. Above his left eye were surgical stitch marks. Below his eyes were neat traditional cicatrix marks. He wore double strings of small red and blue beads around his wrists. People who delved into ancestral spirits, mostly sorcerers and herbalists, wore such beads. His palms were heavily calloused.

Doubt vanished from her. A cold wave ran down her spine. She remembered the prophet’s words: *the plumage of the raven is his clothing*. The man squatting a few metres from her was the demon. Instinct dictated to her to scream. No words came from her mouth though it opened. She shook as if suddenly stricken by Alzheimer’s disease.

“Terrible times are come. This place shall not know peace until your husband presents himself to Bomani. The warrior bans all church gatherings in the hills and in this compound including the one

behind Bomani under the mango tree. No one shall collect firewood or go to their field until Bomani meets Binga. In other words, Bomani is declaring a round the clock curfew and decrees bloodshed beginning now.” He brought his right hand to his chin, clipped his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger and sucked in air, whistling once and shrilly. He brought his hand down and bared the gaps in his mouth to her in a weird smile.

Under the mango tree, the elders stopped singing unceremoniously, and a scuffle seemed to have ensued. Then she saw Remegio pinned to the ground and gesturing. Gesturing and pleading for mercy as though he were strapped to a guillotine. Two of the four intruders held him down. The one with the container was on his feet pouring its contents over the teenager, drenching his garments. The fourth man stood guard, a machete in his hand. She couldn’t understand what was happening.

Was this a reversal of roles; normally sect members drenched believers with holy water during exorcism. Were the men performing some baptismal gimmick on the teenager? The man pouring the unknown substance all over Remegio stepped back, throwing the container at the teenager’s feet and digging his hand into a hip pocket as his colleagues let go of the young man and retreated from the small group. Remegio was rising and making a bewildered gesture facing the man who dosed him when the man struck a match and cast the burning stick at the teenager.

Matipa watched in horror as a small flame hit *Madzibaba* Remegio on the chest. Searing tongues of yellow and blue fire engulfed the teenager and the container on the ground. He slumped on the ground and began screaming. The intruders were immolating Remegio in a scenario reminiscent of the brutal South African xenophobic attack pictures she watched on TV; recalling the disturbing images of black foreigners in that country when they were set on fire alive in the streets of shanty settlements.

Her initial reaction was denial. No! No man can be this cruel to another! It's a realistic nightmare. Nevertheless, the fire on Remegio was ferocious, burning with a crackling sound and sending columns of thick smoke into the boughs of the tree. Still screaming and now trying to beat out the flames, the acolyte staggered to his feet and dashed from the tree. She wanted to rise and flee the scene, but she fell back into the lounge, slumping hard on the floor. He ran as a beheaded cock let loose. The other apostolic members fled in different directions.

Someone had better help, she thought as she watched him bump into the wall of a hut of pole and clay next to the Muja's, fall to the ground and begin to roll back and forth kicking frantically. Though he kept screaming in agony, the screams diminished with his vanishing garments and skin. Remegio's images danced in her glazed eyes filling with tears.

His screams drew people out of their huts, cabins and shanks. Some men came running to find out the cause of the commotion, and perhaps to help, but halted, cringed and held their heads as the teenager rolled, kicked and blazed. Bomani's men waved them away with machetes. The cautious witnessed the horror through open windows, while the overcautious opened neither door nor window. Charred remains of Remegio's garments clung to his blackened body, raw with burns in many places. He lay on his back pressed against the hut, his arms stiff and half-raised in the air, his knees propping up involuntarily. The screams died, but he was grunting and puffing smoke.

Matipa looked about. All their neighbours had suddenly locked up their dwellings and vanished. Coldness settled on her spine as she grasped that everyone in the compound had anticipated the arrival of the demon and was too petrified to come to Remegio's rescue. The fact that people had either fled the scene or locked themselves in their dwellings, meant the compound dwellers weren't

underestimating evil's potential to maelstrom into their lives and destroy them, if they intervened. She was on her own.

The immolator came and stood over Remegio. Between the henchman's legs, Matipa saw that the teenager was jerking and frothing. The nauseating smell of burnt human flesh pervaded the air as the remnants of the teenager's garments smouldered. Matipa felt some warmth in her undergarments and beneath her fundament. When she brought her eyes down, she saw that she was sitting in a pool of her urine. By staying, it appeared she hadn't only signed her death warrant, but that of Peza and several people.

In his dramatic bearing as an exponent of courtesy, Bomani rose, unhurriedly, and turned. For the first time he looked at the brutality which had taken place behind his back, and nodded satisfaction.

"Beautify the blockhead!" He shouted to the man over Remegio.

The man reached into his groin and drew a small metallic, homemade axe from his trousers. Matipa noticed the weapon was the same size and length her husband tried to attack Mr Gilchrist Keneas with. Pressing his left foot on Remegio's chest and holding him down with his weight, the man stooped over Remegio and brought the axe down on the teenager's head in three successive swings.

Matipa looked away as the young man jerked, cried and pleaded for his life with words and gestures. She turned a while later to watch the scene despite the admonition in her not to witness a brutal murder. The man cut him some more and put away the axe. Another man handed him a small gourd decorated with red and blue beads around its mid-section.

He uncorked the gourd and tapped a dark substance from the container onto his right palm. Squatting, he rubbed the substance on Remegio's bleeding wounds and forehead, blackening the areas. Matipa feared the injured teenager was set to die. She sensed it from his growls, grunts, murmurs and the blood oozing from his head. The man corked the gourd again, pocketed it and stood up. He pulled

down the zip of his trousers and pulled out his manhood. Stepping back a pace, he urinated on Remegio's head and shoulders.

Bomani drew Matipa's attention when he rose and quickly crossed to her. She wanted to rise and flee, but she was powerless.

He looked down at her. "Binga must come alone. When the time comes, he'll know where to find Bomani. The warrior will open a communication link with him. Bomani'll meet him among the dead. What guarantee do you offer Bomani you'll convey the message to Binga?"

She was too shocked to think soundly, to accept the reality unfolding before her and that this was the ill-fated day. Her lips quivered. She wanted to assure him he had her word. That she would inform her husband of Bomani's visit. That it would precede her greeting and ushering Akar Muja into their dwelling upon his return. Terror failed her, and she felt extremely cold.

"Leviticus says *the life of the flesh is in the blood*. Bomani can do with your menstrual blood." He stuck out his tongue and wiggled it. "Let Bomani drink the blood and he'll take his leave."

She gaped at him in open disbelief.

"Bomani takes your silence to mean it's either beneath you to collect your menstrual blood or it's not the days for your periods. Handing over your blood would've made things significantly easier, madam." He paused and narrowed his eyes. "Bomani knows you've a son. Peza is his name." He stretched out his right hand, the palm facing up. "Hand over the boy. Binga must fetch the boy from Bomani. This is the only guarantee Bomani is accepting. Where's Peza?"

"I can't do that without his... his father's consent," she protested intending to rise and restrain Bomani physically.

"That's a foolish argument, madam." He showed her his palms. "Peza'll be in good hands for a few days; thereafter he may return and describe to you the pleasures and pains of Sodom and Gomorrah."

“Please, whatever it is, keep my son out of it. He’s innocent.”

“If Bomani’s patience runs out the way it usually does, Bomani’ll cut him into thin ribbons and wear him like a mayoral medal. Of course, you won’t have to bury the head of a goat in lieu of your son’s body. Bomani’ll bring his skull to you for burial. He isn’t a heartless man, madam.”

The stranger stepped over her and a pungent smell assaulted her. He smelled of faeces and urine. In the lounge, he stopped and looked around. As he scanned the room with his eyes, he continued leisurely, “Bomani isn’t a tsunami. He knows no pain can surpass the agony of knowing a dear one lays dead and unburied somewhere. If the worst comes to the worst, Bomani promises you a proper burial for the boy’s skull. If you’re Catholic and the situation permits, Bomani might provide requiem for the boy’s torso. The boy is young and without sin. People his age ascend straight to Heaven when they die. Rites of sepulchre are a good religious send-off, madam. You’ll note the use of the word *religious*.”

Matipa held her breath. “I beg you to leave my son out of this. Please—”

The stranger stared at the closed bedroom door for a while and stroked his cheek thoughtfully. He looked over his shoulder at her. “Tell Binga to bring a spot-free black hen.” He grinned, shook his head and turned as if to exit, only to swing and spring at the inner door, breaking and knocking it down. Matipa screamed and felt something akin to labour pains in her lower abdomen, but he was already in the bedroom and scanning it with his eyes, his back arched and his arms spread in anticipation of grabbing the boy.

Suddenly she stopped screaming; Peza wasn’t in the bedroom. The wardrobe doors were wide open, and the bedroom window she had left closed was ajar. Its curtain flapped in the wind outside. Peza had certainly fled through the window. She remembered the boy telling her he would run. Sighing with relief, she was glad he was cunning and had run.

“Bomani doesn’t speak empty threats,” he said, looking around, his voice still cathedral. “Bomani knows the boy is here. He can smell him like garlic. Should Binga come with the police or any other company, Peza won’t have time to receive his last rites. Bomani’ll decapitate both father and son. Vultures and jackals will devour them. From that day until the day you die, madam, you’ll not know sorrow more agonising. Bomani guarantee’s you that.”

His words and manner of speaking instilled fear in her. She told herself not to consider his rhetoric. She had to remain within her faculties to formulate a defensive framework. Though she worried about Peza, she was sure Bomani wouldn’t catch up with the boy if he looked out the window and saw him fleeing. Even if the stranger gave chase and caught up with him, Peza had the dexterity to dodge him at close range in the way a hare would frustrate and tire a greyhound.

The intruder vainly peered in the wardrobe and slammed the unit’s doors. He looked under the bed, kicked the set in anger and crossed to the window, to look out. Something below the ledge caught his attention. He quickly reached down outside the house, grabbed something cumbersome and began to pull. She felt faint as he pulled Peza back into the bedroom.

With one hand, he held the boy balanced on the ledge and with his other, freed the boy’s rear waistband buckle caught in the window’s lever stud, the culprit that caught Peza and stopped him from fleeing. Turning, he held the boy with both hands and heaved him from the ledge. He peered into the boy’s face, and sniffed it like a dog trying to establish and ascertain long lost kinship. He performed the weird act with Peza suspended in the air, and no strain showing on the man’s face.

Peza wriggled and struggled, his eyes on her on the floor, heart-stalling fear in them. He stretched his hands towards her for protection. All she could do was ogle, tears clouding her eyes, hope deserting her. Despite herself, she was certain the stranger would kill

her son. Bomani smiled reassuringly into Peza's face as he brought him down. She was relieved he was capable of smiling. Assumingly, he was a father and Peza reminded him of his children or their vulnerability.

"In war, women and innocent children suffer the most," he said to the boy. "The tenth plague of Egypt terminated young lives. The Egyptians mourned." He smiled again into his face and placed his left hand on his shoulder. "Blood marked the coming of the Lord into our midst." He stroked the boy's shoulder. "Abortionists make sure some children don't see daylight. You're very lucky to have seen daylight. However, in this world daylight and darkness interchange." Suddenly he straightened and slapped the boy hard across the left temple.

In the room, the sound of the smack was a miniature slap of thunder. Peza yelled in pain and lost balance. With the speed of a boxer, Bomani jabbed him with a clenched fist above the right eye before he fell, sending him flying into the side of the wardrobe. The unit's exterior mirror shattered. The subsequent noise was as if a dozen empty bottles had crushed on a hard surface. The boy, dazed and motionless, lay at Bomani's feet amid shards of broken glass.

Matipa held her head and heard a strange bewildered wail. It was her voice. Perhaps the wail would draw the neighbours, a vain hope against her sensibilities. Who would come after seeing Remegio aflame?

The intruder picked the placid boy and placed him on his left shoulder, Peza's head and arms hanging limply behind the man's back. Matipa struggled to her feet and staggered in blind fury into the bedroom. No weapon or object she could improvise into one lay between her and the demon. With her hands and teeth, she would rip the man apart and pry Peza from this animal. Like a distressed rhinoceros, she approached him.

Bomani was ready for her. He raised his right leg, turned sideward slightly and forcefully thrust his foot into her abdomen,

stopping her forthwith in mid-stride. She yelped and bent over in agony, her intestines and abdominal muscles convalescing in knotted pain. She held her belly and sank to the floor. The pain in her stomach was unbearable. She feared the Caesarean operation she had on giving birth to Peza had yawned open. On her hunches, she keeled, expecting her midsection to redden with blood, but no blood appeared on her body.

Just then, she saw blood on the shards of glass on the floor, which brought a chill in her heart. Undoubtedly, it was her son's blood. Ignoring her pain, she lurched and grabbed Bomani's left leg in both arms. She was inches from sinking her teeth into his thigh, when a blow to the back of her head hit her like a sledgehammer, sending her sprawling face first to the floor.

Matipa smelled blood in her nostrils. Darkness rushed into her eyes and blanketed everything as she lost consciousness.

Chapter 20

Pleased with himself, his ancestors and the charms Mjomba implanted in him in the form of skin-deep incisions stuffed with juju, Binga Jochoma spent the rest of the morning at PaGomo Heights. Though the government declared it a city, nothing was metropolitan about Kadoma and its inhabitants never referred to it as a city.

The town was a haven for gold dealers, genuine and bogus. The streets and taverns of Kadoma were devoid of inspirational merit to roaming Binga. Ghetto-like houses and poverty-stricken townsmen were the last thing a man wishing to live in style overseas wanted to see. He thought the town reverberated with muted mantras of the poverty of its people.

Focusing on the glamour of New York and London, he imagined himself in designer suits and Italian shoes, a Havana between his teeth. Beginning in January, he wouldn't stay in cheap lodges. Alone in his room, he had enough time to reflect on his life and ambitions, and to meditate on the new life he would live shortly, perhaps beginning 1 January. As he saw himself mingling with the rich and famous of Europe and America in the casinos of Las Vegas, on the beaches of Hawaii and in Italy's aristocratic cafeterias along the Riviera, he felt at total peace with the world, like a Buddhist master in meditative mode by a calm river in a dense forest.

Binga went to the window of his room and looked down at the affluent suburb of Mashumavale. Viewed from the mountainside, the houses below seemed artefacts of an inlay outdoing each other in style and design. The architecture was elegantly exotic, an exhibition of architectural aptitude. Monumental in various sizes, colours and shapes, the houses were alabaster petals in a garden of flora, tarred roads, concrete and brick peripheral walls, manicured lawns, flower gardens and trimmed privet hedges. Here and there sunlight

lacquered swimming pools sparkled like diamonds and rubies. Flowering Jacaranda trees abound. On the properties were exorbitant limousines, sports cars and all-terrain jeeps.

The scenery below never ceased to enchant him. If only he could be meticulous and smart enough to swing the robbery at the Musée du Louvre, magazine editors would count him among Africa's richest people. One day soon, he would build or buy a splendid house in America or Europe. His destiny lay in mansions and castles abroad. Living cheap was the prerogative of beggarly fools contented with poverty. Abroad was a luxurious life to be experienced.

If Matipa worked hard in her rented shop in Chimanimani, and was disciplined enough to save money, he was sure one day she would build or buy a house in Mashumavale. Acquisition of such expensive property wasn't an achievable feat to most African wives. For Matipa, a divorced African woman then, it would be a summit of achievement. If she remained diligent and focused, it would be an Ebenezer towards greater things. As he marvelled at the suburb, his futuristic mansion of polished granite and marble subsumed with the Porches, Mercedes Benzes, BMWs and the magnificent houses below. He would disturb the peace of the neighbourhood on a roaring Harley Davidson motorcycle.

The splendour below, intrinsically blending with the greenery of a coy golf course and the splendid five-star Kadoma Hotel & Conference Centre as its backdrop, was something he couldn't have imagined years ago in Chikukwa Village. Surely, it was beyond the fantasy of an insignificant person born on a cow-dung-smeared floor in a hut of poles, clay and grass. A child bred next to a pen of mooing cows and bellowing bulls, and whose bedding was the latrine for chicken that strayed into the hut, hardly imagined aristocratic luxury. As someone who grew up without underwear and only got to wear a mini-brief towards adolescence, he could only confine his imagination to humble aspirations.

Now, looking down at the houses owned and occupied by fellow human beings who had probably excelled in one area or the other, and perhaps less gifted in logic as he was, he told himself all it took was hard work and determination for one to be a proud owner of such property overseas. Men and women who bled when cut and answered to the calls of nature the way he did, not aliens from unknown planets, lived in Mashumavale. Definitely, he would own better property in America or Europe. He daydreamed of a mansion peopled with an exotic wife, coloured children, house cleaners, gardeners and a professional butler. He saw a Labrador lying on its veranda and two pit bulldogs roaming the yard. If it was imaginable, it was achievable.

He reckoned most of the house owners in the suburb had either killed for body parts or delved in goblins to get where they were. Of course, academic degrees and diplomas played a part in elevating a person to status, but in most instances, he guessed such qualifications were just a façade. Only people daring enough to use juju, became prominent in the society. African politicians and businesspersons frequented diviners. Binga was a man of juju. On that ticket, he was en route to riches and prominence. Now that he had the right amount he required and was desirous of a moral livelihood, he found it necessary to strategise.

He resolved to inform Matipa of his legal marriage to Nomathemba in Bulawayo. After some days, he would travel to his wedded wife and tell her about Matipa and Peza. Of course, he would go down on his knees and apologise about the dishonesty, and immediately go on to spoil them with expensive gifts. If the two agreed, perhaps he would construct a spacious house at the business centre in Chimanimani, or in Mashumavale sprawled before him, and put his wives under one roof. There was nothing sinister about being African and polygamous. He knew of some poor men who were happily married to more than three wives.

Nomathemba flickered in his mind. She bore lovely children who didn't live beyond infancy. She fed the earth with human flesh. He missed Nyanyadzi and Rusitu, his daughters. The children died mysteriously. Chances were witchcraft claimed them. However, because the mother once lived in the United Kingdom, she saw it beneath her to consult diviners. Binga pitied her lame reasoning. By turning away from diviners, she professed belief in medical science and a heartless God.

Her other disquieting side was her sexual insatiability. He suspected that besides the menial work emigrants often performed in Britain and other developed countries, Nomathemba might have doubled or worked as a brothel prostitute. She seemed to perceive life's comforting rituals in overindulgence. In her wardrobe was a dildo he discovered a year ago, but chose not to mention it. To her he wasn't a husband, he felt, but a sexual tool, an extension of the dildo she concealed. Then there was the bizarre terra cotta figurine of a pregnant torso she kept on the headboard, lamely explaining it as a souvenir from London.

He doubted her strongly, arguing the headless statuette was either Indian or Arabic, and not the least British. Threatening to forego his conjugal rights, a dreaded first step to divorce, he had demanded the truth, accusing her of delving in unknown gods that could jeopardise their young marriage. She opened up and told him it was one of the hundreds of figurines unearthed by archaeologists in the ancient plains of Anatolia, now Turkey.

She said the figurine originated from the ancient town of Catal Huyuk, and alleged a female friend of hers who worked for the British Institute of Archaeology gave her the figurine, which gave it the strength of a souvenir. The explanation rested the matter for about two years. When Nyanyadzi and Rusitu died, he blamed their death on the figurine, accusing her of importing bloodthirsty Turkish demons into their marriage. He took the carving outside the house,

doused it with paraffin and set it on fire. Terra cotta being terra cotta, the fire didn't scathe it.

Binga found a hammer and was set to crush it to pieces when Nomathemba came running from the house and salvaged it, calling him a barbaric gigolo. If he wasn't too pleased with her and her possessions, she suggested, including the house she inherited from her parents, he was free to walk out. He called her a pagan virago, and told her the house wasn't worth talking about; the roof leaked and the walls had cracks and mended crevices. He called the house a dormant volcano.

She called him an unthankful vagrant. He trembled with anger. But because she spoke on top of her voice and a crowd of onlookers was gathering, mostly neighbours from the crammed houses, and they had the figurine outside, which could be mistaken for a goblin and have them thrashed for practising witchcraft by members of the public, Binga took the statuette inside. However, time had mended their differences, and with its passage, he increasingly despised himself against staying with his wedded wife in her inherited house. In the humble house, she domineered over everything. He was wrong in valuing a marriage certificate.

Until recently, she had precedence over Matipa, Peza and then Gillian. Now Gillian was topmost. It meant an abrupt change of plans.

Chapter 21

Upon coming to about half an hour after the mysterious horde abducted Peza and left, Matipa wailed, throwing herself at the floor, at walls and on the ground in suicidal leaps. It took many men and women from the compound to restrain her. They pinned her to the ground and tied her ankles and wrists together, but she remained hysterical, screaming her son's name and calling her husband to come to Peza's rescue. All the while, her hands were at her belly as she wriggled in pain akin to labour. The pain reminded her of the day she gave birth to the boy, and the preceding nine months of his pregnancy. She cried the more and came close to cursing God.

As she looked at the clouds in an attempt to see God and send a petition to Him, her conviction that God worked all things for her eventual good fell apart. There just was no God in Heaven or on earth, otherwise the gang wouldn't have kidnapped Peza and burnt Remegio alive. For the first time in her life, she blamed herself abysmally for believing in a God that looked away when she most needed Him. Perhaps, after all, there once was God, now He was dead.

Mr Gilchrist Keneas drove into the mine premises a few minutes after the disappearance of the gang into the nearby western wild forest. He didn't see any of the savages though he found Remegio smouldering and coughing smoke. He rushed Remegio to Kadoma General Hospital in his jeep no one else at the mine had ever ridden but Ivy.

About two hours later, he brought six armed police officers to the mine. Four of the six police officers quickly secured the mine, while a sergeant and a constable came to interview her in the lounge. The officers unbound her ankles and wrists.

“I could’ve brought more policemen but there was no way I could fit them in the jeep,” Mr Keneas said. “Venice Police Post has only one vehicle.”

“At least the policemen should’ve come with some dogs,” she protested.

“Their sergeant-in-charge was out on routine patrol. I made a trespassing, kidnapping and attempted murder report against the horde. The man responsible gave me six men.”

The Sergeant and the mill manager entered the bedroom and inspected the bloodied shards of glass on the floor. Proof of violence implored the officer to radio Kadoma Central Police Station for the Support Unit, an auxiliary back-up arm of the police. He pleaded for the urgent deployment of the Dog Unit.

Matipa couldn’t help eavesdropping on the jarring radio communication made in her lounge.

“The Police Commissioner disbanded the district’s Dog Unit years ago. Kindly lodge your request in writing with Police Headquarters in Harare. Over.”

“Roger. Time is of the essence. Five suspects kidnapped a boy. Suspects fleeing westwards. Confirm copy and advise. Over.”

“Boy Kidnapped. Five suspects fleeing westwards from Sakis Mine. Venice Post requesting Dog Unit. Over.”

“Good copy, Sergeant. Advise. Over.”

“Request impossible. I repeat: Request impossible. Only major cities have dog units. Kindly raise the Officer Commanding Kadoma district authorised to make applications to HQ. Over.”

“Loud and clear, Officer, but our sergeant-in-charge is out on patrol. This is an emergency. Over.”

The signal’s man at Kadoma sighed in exasperation, “Roger, emergencies don’t override protocol and procedure. Support Unit is on its way. Do you copy?”

“Good copy, Roger.”

“Roger out.”

Time dragged. Mr Keneas tired of idling and left for his house. Matipa mourned her son, neighbours and members of her sect consoling her.

A truckload of members of the Police Support Unit arrived after forty-five minutes in a grey truck. The armed men in dark blue fatigues, about a score and a half, gathered for a briefing at the scene of the crime before the sergeant sent them out on foot to comb the surrounding forest and hills, especially on the westward side. The men were sunburnt and physically fit, and seemed vying to rout anything. Matipa knew the men also doubled as the Riot Police in times of political upheavals and demonstrations.

A helicopter would've been ideal, she felt, but Zimbabwe was a developing country. Nevertheless, she supposed if it were the child of a cabinet minister or someone on the presidential hierarchy, authorities would've deployed military helicopters and an entire brigade. Battlefields, an infantry barrack popularly known as BF, was less than ten kilometres away.

Chapter 22

As Binga Jochoma stood at the window, an excited boy riding a BMX bicycle along an avenue in Mashumavale reminded him of Peza, the peak, the *banderillero* and the gem of his life meant to be in the limelight of his thoughts. Contemplating the people dearest to him, beginning with any other order was wrong and despicable of him. Peza was the natural heir to the estate he would establish. At six, the boy was Grade 0 or 1 material. Unfortunately, Sakis Mine's nearest primary school was at Venice Mine, about seven kilometres away. As a father, he found it punitive to make his son walk such a long distance to learn foreign rhymes and scribble stupid patterns in the earth.

Though Binga repelled former oppressors in the country, he admired their single-mindedness towards accumulation of wealth. He had seen local whites giving cars and sprawling houses to their children at weddings, and found the custom highly admirable. In that fashion, he was establishing himself for Peza's benefit. Binga had once been to Paris to stare at the *Mona Lisa*. His understanding of life overseas was a plethora of decadence and anomy. People who returned from Britain, Australia and America told tales of men marrying men, women taking the oath of marriage with women, and extravaganzas of gay parades of semi-nude participants. Surgeons turned men into women and vice versa.

Obviously sensational Nomathemba had faked virginity when he married her. Was it possible for a girl to go through secondary education and attend Bulawayo Teachers' College, and yet remain a virgin? Her virginity was perhaps a result of surgery or juju. The latter made sense. With juju, a person could do anything. The painful truth was that she fled him and the paramilitary police and became a victim of London's hurly-burly matrix of sexual madness.

He thought of Matipa. She had started well by bearing him a son, but the rest of their marriage was fruitless. He suspected she had been bewitched and was probably going about devoid of her ovaries and womb. Some witches and wizards were probably using her womb to breed goblins or merely as a pouch for the safe keep of valuable fetishes. Although Matipa had never been abroad, she was too Christian to consult traditional healers for her redemption. His seed on her was as purposeless as steady rain falling on a derelict graveyard.

Then there was studious and encyclopaedic Gillian, a second-year student of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Zimbabwe, a goal-getter who brooded in her broad-mindedness. Before she attained the age of forty, she hoped to have risen to the post of Minister of Information and Publicity. Now she was twenty and financially dependent on him. Her father was a struggling, underpaid government headmaster. Gillian's age and dreams fascinated Binga.

Essentially, he wanted to be married to a composite woman of Matipa's meekness, Nomathemba's figure and Gillian's encyclopaedic disposition, all aspects alloyed into one woman.

He met Gillian about a year ago on a drizzling day in Harare while he was cruising in a rental double cab 240D Toyota Hilux. Customarily, he hired such vehicles whenever he was whiling time and unwinding in Harare after a prowling. Aimless driving through the streets and avenues of a city took a man's mind from anything. Gillian was walking on First Street's thoroughfare along Jason Moyo Avenue when he spotted her in a loose black and white sleeveless polka-dotted blouse, tight elastic black slacks and cheap knee-high boots all likely purchased from one of many Chinese shops dotted in the city. She held a small translucent umbrella over her plaited head covered in a ginger-tainted cascading weave.

The satchel on her back and the tome in her free hand betrayed her as a college student. Most students were struggling under the

economic hardships. He pulled to the curb at the intersection of First Street and Jason Moyo Avenue, and hooted, attracting the attention of many strollers and shoppers including hers. He pointed at her and beckoned. She shook her head, drew a countenance of repulsion and shrugged before hastening away into the hustle and jostle on the thoroughfare. Wheel by wheel, he eased the four-wheel vehicle onto the prohibited thoroughfare and followed her steadily along First Street, panicking shoppers, newspaper vendors and idlers scurrying out of the way and looking at him in disgust. She didn't realise he was trailing her, only to be startled when he hooted again when he was less than two metres behind her. She stopped and her mouth gapped. He pressed a button, automatically winding down his window, and beckoned her to come to his side. She did, quickly, in a miasma of confusion.

In a low firm voice, he said to her, "The President's Office would like to interview you for a few minutes. My name is Ralph. PR Department. Have the goodness to climb into the vehicle."

"I don't believe this. What've I done?" She looked around, appealing for public intervention.

About a score of puzzled people had stopped and were looking at them.

"I'm a student." The last sentence was a protest of innocence.

He knew she understood it was dangerous for her to turn her back on him and walk away. "It's routine for the Office to pick people at random for interviews." He leaned sideward and opened the passenger door for her, and quickly motioned her to cross over the other side and enter. He did it curtly, knowing any further delay could see him ticketed for dangerous parking, or incarcerated for posing as a member of the Central Intelligence Organisation.

She closed her umbrella and entered the vehicle nervously. He drove off along Nelson Mandela Avenue as the curious crowd was beginning to swell. When they were along Nelson Mandela Road past Parliament Building, he drew from the glove compartment a pen and

a notebook, opened a blank page and gave them to her. "Write your name, surname and ID number." He ordered without looking at her. "Put your address and contact numbers at the bottom. Do you think this country will ever be a British colony again?" The last question meant to boggle and throw her off balance.

"No sir. I don't think so."

"Go ahead. Write your name and the other details."

She scribbled fearfully on the notebook.

Quietly, as if to the steering wheel, he said, "Zimbabwe shall never be a colony again. Don't you agree, young lady?"

She nodded. "Many people are now educated and wise."

They came to Fourth Street. He turned east and took the notebook from her. As he skilfully negotiated through traffic, he read aloud what she had written. The idea was to keep her occupied, instil fear and prevent her from asking questions or demanding an official ID.

Gillian Mpaya Gadaga

ID No: 24-0082908-X-44 Student No: 1216/008

Address: No. 12 Chipazi Close, Seke, Chitungwiza

Her cell phone number was below the address. He was memorising the number when her cell phone rang. It was in a small purse now on top of the tome on her lap.

"Breathe in and exhale slowly. Tell the caller to ring back after an hour," he commanded her. "You're in an important meeting at the university."

She drew in air. Her brassiere-cupped breasts jutted up. His eyes riveted on them, only for a while. The breasts seemed the accoutrements of a predator, but there was no reversal of roles here; he was the predator.

“Hello. I’m sorry I’m in a meeting at the college, Father. Can I call you back after an hour?” She returned the cell phone into her purse.

“What does your father do for a living?”

“He’s a school headmaster in Chitungwiza.”

“During the struggle, did he sympathise with the guerrillas or Ian Smith?”

“I think with the guerrillas. He was at secondary school.”

“Your mother, what does she do for a living?”

“She’s a bursar at a primary school in Mbare.”

“How many are you in your family?”

“Six. Two girls and four boys. The youngest are twins in Grade Four.”

She went on to tell him she was the firstborn. The second born was a boy doing Advanced Level at Sandringham High, a boarding school near the docile dormitory town of Norton forty kilometres to the south west of Harare. The third born was her only sister, Bertha, in Form 3 at the school where their father was a headmaster. He noted Bertha was the only one she mentioned by name, and supposed she and Bertha were very close. The rest of the siblings were in primary school.

“You must be hungry, eh?”

“A little, sir. I was on my way home.”

“What does Gillian normally have for lunch?”

“Quarter chicken and chips. At times pizza.”

He knew she was lying; the food was well above the reach of a student with struggling parents. The government having scratched grants and loans, university education was financially demanding. Her parents were obviously having a torrid time budgeting meagre salaries to afford her bus fare, research books, toiletries, and the exorbitant fees and levies. He drove her to the serene Cresta Lodge Hotel near Msasa Park in the north. The hotel, its gardens, artefacts and decor astounded Gillian when she alighted from the car.

"These are hard times for many people," he said to her across the table when they were lunching on Bolognese spaghetti, mixed grill and goblets of champagne, which made her grimace when she sipped it. The taste definitely tortured her, but she didn't want him to see her as an uncivilised goat that couldn't take a full European meal. They were at a secluded table in the hotel's restaurant. "I meant to interrogate you on possible student uprisings at the university, but my intuition tells me you're neither a troublemaker nor one who can despise her country after graduation. Most malcontents who graduate from our universities end up bad-mouthing the State and the President in Europe and America. We've a programme to weed out all outspoken students, possibly thwart them before the Chancellor, His Excellency the President, caps them."

"I see," she murmured fearfully, frozen briefly. "I've a clean record and keep to myself. It isn't in me to instigate or take part in student demonstrations. The last demonstrations spilled into the CBD. Rowdy mobs and gangsters hijacked them." She paused. "The teargas and the looting that followed were terrible."

"It's in my capacity to employ you as an informant. It's a dangerous job, but one of trust that also pays handsomely. You'll report to me in person directly and privately." He placed six fifty-dollar banknotes beside her plate. "Of course, there're a bit of perks to cushion you here and there."

She stared at the money, then at him.

"For three hundred dollars a month, will you take this offer, Gillian?"

"I'll need to think about it, sir."

"You sound as if I'm proposing to you," he had smiled for the first time. "I'm not on a romantic mission, though I'm single and would find it a blessing to fall in love with you. I've been lonely for a long, worrisome time now. Perhaps I should be married and a father by now. Anyway, that's personal, Gillian." He shrugged and continued. "Actually, I'm making you a job offer which any student

in their right senses can't resist. This is easy money. You can call me Ralph. Tell me more about yourself, perhaps all there's to know about lovely Gillian." He tacked the money into her brassiere some centimetres from her cleavage.

An hour later, they walked back to the car. He walked tall, holding her hand, while she walked beside him smiling and faking resistance. A time would come when he would inquire after her virginity. He remembered telling her he would change her world, and thinking: if vultures pecked at her hymen then she had no place in his life.

"What's your cell number, Ralph?"

He was ready for the question. "On one hand the nature of my job doesn't permit me to own a cell phone, sweetie, and I mustn't be traceable. On the other hand, radio waves harm your mind and body. Medical research is beginning to link low sperm count to cell phones. A real man shouldn't compromise his virility for anything."

She was aghast. Then she laughed despite herself. "I think I need to give you a full lecture on the importance of communication. This isn't the era of dinosaurs."

"I'll be honoured to listen to your voice... just the sound of it whether it's speaking gibberish, poetry or singing ballads. You ought to know I'm a shadow. You're in love and working with a shadow." He changed the subject. "When we meet next time, it could be after a day, a week or two hours..."

"Huh?"

"You must tell me you love me. Don't tell me there's someone in your life. You might put the nincompoop in trouble."

"But I don't know you, Ralph."

"Do you wish to know a shadow? What's the length, breath and height of a shadow, Gillian? Is there a faculty at the university teaching these things?"

He opened the door for her, and loudly sniffed her as she brushed past him into the car. She wore no perfume and smelled feminine. They drove out of Cresta Lodge Hotel.

“Are you telling me you don’t have a cell phone, Ralph, and you’re single?”

“That’s the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“How old are you?” She looked at him boldly.

“Give a guess, sweetie.”

“Twenty-eight. No, no. Twenty-six.”

He smiled at her. He was thirty-two then. “You’re expert at guessing. I’m twenty-six.”

“But you must have some children... one or two children, illegitimate perhaps.”

“I believe in waiting, in epic romance and a white wedding. I can’t have reserved myself for an unceremonious customary marriage under a baobab tree.”

She laughed, but from there onwards, she never took off her eyes from him. “What’re you, Ralph? What did you study?”

“I studied Classics. I also hold a degree in Politics & War from Oxford University, but in all honesty, I’m an aggregate of my things. I mastered empty-hands defence, karate if you like, and judo in Japan. I took martial arts courtesy of the President’s Office. I received commando training at Wafa-Wafa near Kariba. When I look at the whole thing, I can safely say I studied survival. It’s time I discovered the meaning of *to have and to hold* or *is it to have and to behold*? My eyes have seen too much blood. Now I must train them to appreciate the beauty of a woman. Your beauty, with time, might obliterate the grim traumatic images in my head.”

She looked at him in dread and admiration. This was what young women craved, involvement with a half-tame lethal weapon. Danger and romance drew them like mice to the fangs of a cobra. He knew blending lies with the truth worked well for a man proposing love, and an excitable woman was easy prey.

“Will I see proof of all this?”

They were now entering the CBD. “Oh, I see you’re a staunch believer in the law of evidence. I might as well be talking to a lawyer here. Gillian, you’re telling me a person of your intelligence requires the conviction of certificates, pieces of paper, not the word of a learned man to adjudge him learned?”

“Proof rests doubt.”

“You’ll see and lay your hands on my papers bearing the Oxford seal.” He paused slightly and continued: “I hope you’re not offended by my calling you sweetie. I mean it from my heart. I don’t know how I’ve fallen in love with you in such a short time. I’m not compelling you to return the love. Though I won’t be offended if you turned me down, I’d be hurt. When is your next birthday?”

“Five March.”

“I’ve engraved it in my heart. Five March... about three weeks after St. Valentine’s Day. I foresee us celebrating an unforgettable lovers’ day at the Troutbeck Inn in Nyanga. If you like, we could stay at the Victoria Falls Hotel near the World’s Seventh Wonder. The choice is yours.”

“I must think about everything.” She blinked several times thoughtfully. “Before I took up Journalism and Mass Communication, I studied criminal law for a year, only to realise statutes, legal precedents and stuff weren’t for me. Law left an imprint in me. I’m compelled to think and analyse things in set patterns. I believe in evidence. You’ve presented your case. It’s now up to me to test it.”

“Oh, interesting. In our case will you be the judge and jury?”

“Yes, and will do so without bias or favour. I liked it when you said *it’s the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.*”

“Well, Law is not my province, but I understand the mindset of a criminal.”

“Perhaps you studied criminology as a crash programme, Ralph, or you’re a criminal.”

Both had laughed. Both had many things to talk about and both fascinated the other. Binga had felt twenty again. He grabbed her hand, brought it to his mouth and kissed it. Though the cleavage in her bosom was a subpoena, he restrained himself from touching her; it would give the impression of a lustful man seeking easy prey. Romance and war were the same in consisting of waiting.

He bought her a cocktail dress and two hipsters at a boutique, and drove her to Seke in Chitungwiza. On parting, he said he would miss her. She answered she would miss him too. He noticed her eyes watered. It sounded as though he was going overseas when in fact they were meeting the next day when he would come in the morning and drive her to the University of Zimbabwe.

That was how they had fallen in love. The experience was dramatic and set adrenalin rushing in his veins. However, at the back of his mind he had worried he was possibly wasting his time and ingenuity with a broken, promiscuous girl. Universities and colleges were dens for whores. At the right time, he would ask the question before he wasted large sums and time on her.

A week afterwards, they were dining at an elite restaurant in the city when he asked her the question.

“I thought you were riff-raff about that, Ralph.”

“I care, Gillian. I seriously do.”

“Of course, I’m intact. That’s my pride and special gift to you when the time comes.”

Binga had shivered with excitement.

Now, having thought at length about Gillian at PaGomo Heights, Binga no longer saw the beautiful houses below, but the young woman’s face. He had last seen her about a month ago. Normally he visited Nomathemba to see to it she expended his libido before he visited youthful and untarnished Gillian, his reservation for a special occasion. Someday, he would force himself on her. However, despite his not having visited his wild seaside donkey for the expending, he resolved to go and see the darling of his life determined to restrain

himself as usual. From Harare, he would then travel to Sakis Mine with Christmas gifts for Matipa and Peza. He would tell them the good news about the business venture, find an excuse, leave them packing, and travel to Bulawayo to see voracious Nomathemba.

Reconsidering, he felt it was better for him to take a good rest and travel the following morning. He needed enough time to get to the capital city and hire a car. Since his relationship with Gillian had now naturally assumed the languor of marriage, it was imperative for him to buy groceries for her family and a few goodies for his sweetheart. At their house in Chitungwiza, he would arrive laden and in style. Resolved to travel to see his sweetheart in Harare the next day, he left the window and went to lie on his back on the bed amid five thousand and three hundred dollars, his *Akar Muja* identity card, the axe, knife and pair of collapsible binoculars. Concrete planning was required. As he stared at the ceiling, he made a rough itinerary.

He would spend a night in the capital city and travel to Sakis Mine on the second day for the disclosure. Though his legal marriage would astound and disappoint Matipa, he hoped the money, gifts and business venture would compensate for everything. Then he would travel to Bulawayo and tell Nomathemba about his other wife and child, and ask her to look for a suburban house of her choice. Upon his return from the second capital city, he would take Matipa and Peza to the growth-point in Chimanimani. He just had to launch the venture as soon as possible. Once the grocer's shop was stocked and operational, he would fly out of the country, destination Paris.

However, as he lay on the bed he had second thoughts. The disclosures wouldn't serve any purpose. He didn't love the two women. It was absurd for him to worry about them. Only Peza and Gillian were important to him, and only after visiting his sweetheart would he really decide what to do with his wives. After visiting Gillian, he foresaw himself travelling east to see the Sufi hermit.

Chapter 23

With Peza almost lifeless and draped like a towel on Bomani Kumanda's shoulder, the six men kept away from footpaths and human settlements. Three standard metal trunks and three *Gule Wamkulu* drums burdened the men but didn't slow them down. A string secured the drums together such that one person carried all the three at a time. One of the trunks had clothing, the second loose biscuits and baked beans, and the third wooden *Gule Wamkulu* zoomorphic masks and other paraphernalia; animal tails, multi-coloured traditional beads, loincloths and juju gourds. The group's weapons, six machetes, a loaded AK 47 rifle and three extra magazines, were among the ritualistic accoutrements in the third trunk.

They trudged through unforgiving thorny thickets, crawled under boughs and walked across hills, until they were several kilometres from their latest crime scene. Westwards, human settlements were sparse and populations thinned, giving way to a wild forest of deciduous trees chiming with the ceaseless orchestras of cicadas and other insects. When they were deep into the forest and certain of encountering few people, they changed into their scant *kamwimwi* garbs and fled on footpaths, moving with speed and ruthlessness on themselves and the boy, like soldiers on a prime military campaign.

Peza gained consciousness when they were well into the forest. Bomani put him down and ordered his wrists bound behind him, but the boy looked into the sullen faces of the team and screamed in panic, vainly attempting to bolt. By then they were quite out of earshot from any settlements. Bomani gestured for a fresh twig as he pinned the boy down with his foot. A henchman brought him a long and tapering one with small white hooked thorns like the beaks of minstrel birds. The boy's facial features, especially the lips, the eyes

and the ears, resembled his father. Bomani whipped him all over, the thorns lacerating him.

Peza wriggled and cried until he lost his voice, but Bomani didn't believe in half-jobs. He continued to thrash the boy until the lips that reminded him of Binga assured him of compliance and submission. Suddenly in mock sympathy, he picked the boy and shocked him by licking his tears dry, and tasted some of the blood on his lacerated neck. *The life of the flesh was in the blood*; that was what the Book had taught him. Only then did the stupefied boy seem to realise completely that he wasn't only in wrong hands, but that his captor could kill and devour him.

With Peza whimpering in pain, his hands tied behind his back with a thin wire rope, the team made their strategic escape westwards. One man, in nothing but a loincloth and smeared all over in mud and ashes, walked over three hundred metres ahead as a pathfinder. He carried nothing but brandished a log and held high a long stick with a red cloth at the end. The crude pendant was a danger warning sign of the advent and passage of the feared *kamwimwi nyau* dancers. On sighting people in the distance, he whistled and waved the stick with the red cloth.

The locals were scared of *nyau* dancers, including the *kamwimwi*. The Malawian dancers, whether they were gyrating in their grotesque masks or dashing about semi- or completely naked smeared in ochre and ashes, frightened communities. People couldn't dissociate them from evil spirits and witchcraft because they camped in graveyards by night and day. The mystery and lives of the dancers confounded the locals. Thriving on the locals' fear of the masquerades, Bomani and his men made their escape until they came to a shaft when night was falling.

The western forest was familiar territory to Bomani. He knew every hiding grove, crevice and thicket in it. The area was once alive with gold mining activities and hundreds of illegal miners. The shaft they came to was on his calculated escape plan. By the look of it,

spiders had long sealed the mouth of the shaft. Budding green grass, delicate in its youthfulness, grew un-trodden around the opening of the shaft. When Bomani cast a stone in it, it was after a while of listening that the sound of its landing reached them on the surface, an indication the bottom wasn't flooded. They cleared the webs and tested the strength of a wire rope lowered in it, but they didn't descend immediately. Leaving their baggage and Peza with one man at the shaft, they took strategic positions in a wide radius in the bushes around it, each men scanning the direction he faced for possible trails.

After thirty minutes, Bomani whistled and the men re-converged at the shaft. They descended, leaving an AK 47-armed sentinel on the surface. When two men had gone down, Bomani blindfolded Peza with the boy's T-shirt as a precaution against the fear of depth the little one might have. He untied his hands and placed him on his shoulders, ordering him to cling to his head or he risked falling to his death in the shaft. Peza complied silently.

He descended with the shuddering boy on his shoulders, groping for the rungs on the wire rope with his booted feet. The gunner followed them down after about an hour and a half. Caution was the name of the game, and the game lasted for as long as one was cautious enough.

Chapter 24

By nightfall, the police search units started to return, their effort vain. Returning crestfallen and tired, the men saluted and reported in Matipa's hearing that neither they nor members of the public had sighted the alleged horde and the boy on any of the surrounding mines and farms. No members of the community, apart from some residents of Sakis Mine, had seen any strangers, the boy or any horde meeting their description. All the police officers began to look at her strangely as if she had made up a story.

"Surely, someone ought to have seen the smartly dressed men," the Duty Sergeant observed. "It was noon and they fled on foot. Perhaps I'm not getting the facts right." He was silent for a moment. "I must warn you against perjury, madam."

"Why would I lie?" she blurted. "My child was kidnapped. Someone was set on fire."

"Though the suspects had a good lead, definitely someone ought to have seen them outside this mine. Something is wrong or amiss here."

She wanted to tell him the ringleader was a demon, but the sergeant appeared too worldly to tolerate religious prophecies, and would find her absurd. The Sergeant re-interviewed her, crosschecking her narrative of the crime against notes he entered earlier in a notebook. When she reached the part when the intruder seized and struck Peza, she broke down and wept. The Sergeant left her in the company of members of the Support Unit. She knew he had gone out to re-interview some neighbours.

A knock came on the door. *Madzibaba* Tinashe entered escorted by a police officer. He couldn't prelude his entry with the customary declaration of peace to the household; the circumstances just weren't

allowing. The elder sat down and remained tacit, his eyes on the floor.

“You shouldn’t have walked out of the meeting,” Matipa mourned.

“Remegio is still in the Intensive Care Unit. I’ve just returned from visiting him.”

“How is he?”

“His whole body is a wound.” For about half a minute, he fell into contemplative silence. “They’ve surrounded his bed with electric heaters. Nurse aids are scrubbing him with ointments. One doctor said if he had arrived five minutes later he would’ve died before admission.” Again, he fell silent, but only for a while. “Remegio is saying unnerving things on the hospital bed.”

“Maybe the attack affected his brain,” she suggested.

“No, *Madzimai*. He isn’t bluffing or in shock.”

“What was he saying, *Madzibaba* Tinashe?”

“The teenager is in a trance. He’s staring at the ceiling without moving a facial muscle. Now and then, he pries off the oxygen mask on his face and says in a strange voice, “*Bomani decrees blood and mayhem! The crows are gathering! Men and women shall fall by Bomani’s hand until Binga presents himself! The arena awaits action! As tree stumps bleed sap, the men shall fight!*” He says this again and again without variation.”

“What did the doctors say?”

“The doctors and nurses say its traumatic shock... something no one should worry about, but I cannot believe them. They said he was hallucinating.” He sighed. “Who’s Binga?”

She felt as though an ice-cold hand cinctured her heart. “The man who seized Peza said Binga was my husband. He referred to himself as Bomani.”

The elder looked at her in shock, and adjusted the shawl on his left shoulder. “Could your husband be this man Binga?”

“That’s preposterous, *Madzibaba* Tinashe. I’ve known my husband for seven years now.”

He nodded. “The demon was lost, that’s the only logical conclusion. Demons get lost without proper guidance and signs. Blood on doorposts guided the Passover angel.”

Their conversation puzzled the two police officers in the room.

The word *blood* reminded her of Bomani’s absurd request, but she couldn’t disclose to the elder that the brute asked for her menstrual blood.

“Remegio is parroting he’s Bomani. I must get Prophet Jatropa to pray for him. Baba Johannes was against dependence on hospitals and the white man’s medicine. It’s by faith that we conquer evil.”

She should’ve said *amen* in affirmation, but she no longer believed.

“Perhaps Remegio was right,” the elder said thoughtfully. “The Spirit cannot predict evil and lack a solution. In the morning, I must see *Madzibaba* Jatropa. Believers mustn’t live in fear or uncertainty.”

Madzibaba Tinashe left under the escort of the armed police officer.

Chapter 25

For the umpteenth time, Binga Jochoma sipped Coca Cola as he sat in a bedside chair and went through a Louvre pre-robbery mental inventory he hatched and perfected ever since he visited the museum and saw the *Mona Lisa*.

To relax and get accustomed to France, he would spend the first two days touring like an innocent African. He would visit the flag-draped *Musée de l'Armée* in the city and marvel at Charles Richefeu's 'Fiery Patriot' statue of the Napoleonic grenadier. In the museum, he would test the juju to see if he would disappear. He would tour the imposing Cathedral of Chartres and go round the magnificent Palace of Versailles, the eighteenth century historic residence of Louis XIV. On the second day, he would tour the Arc de Triomphe, an impressive memorial. Throughout the tours, he would mingle unassumingly with the French and their international tourists, to see if he wasn't attracting undue attention, or remained visible when he performed disappearing acts.

If everything was favourable and his heart urged him to go for it, the third day would be the day. He would don a business suit and smuggle an empty duffle bag big enough to contain a painting seventy-nine by fifty-four centimetres. He would hire a taxi to the Eiffel Tower. Another taxi would take him to the Rue de Rivoli where he would disembark and walk across the garden section of Rue Castiglione, the northern portal of Paris' famous Tuileries Gardens, pausing to marvel at its pond in its exquisite central boulevard, but essentially to look over his shoulder.

He would exit the garden park under the Arc du Carrousel, a monumental archway with a tourist attraction of its own. From the gigantic archway, a third taxi would take him to the observatory esplanade at the periphery of the Tuileries Gardens. He planned his route to appear leisurely in case he would be under suspicion. A

fourth taxi would whisk him to the Louvre. With a perimeter over four thousand eight hundred metres long, the Louvre was probably the longest building in the world. It housed over sixty-five thousand pieces of art, among them Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, its most esteemed artwork. In the second and third positions were the *Venus de Milo* and *Winged Victory* respectively. In its numerous chambers were works by international masters, proof of the thievery or procurement skills of France's ancient noblemen and modern political leaders.

The money in Paris couldn't buy the treasures of the Louvre. If not all the money in Paris could buy the contents of the Louvre, then how did France acquire them? By hook, crook and thievery, Binga reasoned. Paradoxically, protecting loot arbitrarily acquired was a sophisticated security system consisting of armed security personnel, remote alarms, CCTV cameras, movement sensors, biometric locks and automatic steel gates that barricaded burglars inside the complex.

Juju wouldn't take care of the system. Alarms would sound. Barricades would fall and lock automatically. However, juju would make him invisible. The one-man heist would succeed. The painting would leave the Louvre.

By 8:30 am, he would stand among tourists at the entrance of the horseshoe shaped façade of the famous museum as its doors opened to the public. Using the spectacular Pyramid entrance, he would descend into the visitors' lobby of the museum and walk down a lengthy passage until he came to an elevator landing two storeys below the Denon Wing. An elevator would take him to the wing, a series of interconnected galleries, one of which was the Grand Gallery in which was the chamber called the Salle des Etats.

The *Mona Lisa* was a solitary, famed masterpiece in a secluded cell in the Salle des Etats. Inside the Etats, a hallmark for state of the art security he anticipated would be full of tourists; the first phase of the robbery proper would begin in earnest. Nothing would hinder him from stealing the *Mona Lisa*. In France's Loire Valley, Leonardo da

Vinci's relics in his tomb at Amboise Castel would turn. The French, as they did in 1911 when robbers stole the painting, would mourn openly for its return while he transacted the masterpiece in New York City.

Chapter 26

Night fell, with it returned more members of the police Support Unit from the search. Every time their boots clattered on the ground as they approached Matipa's house, her heart beat faster with expectation. She hoped against her falling optimism that the police would bring her son back. They came back in twos and threes, each group always reporting a vain search. Their reporting became a repertoire: "Sergeant, this is so-and-so, who were combing such-and-such an area. The search was vain."

"Any possible leads, Constable?" the sergeant would urge.

"No leads, sir, suspects not seen at all."

However, one group reported learning from people they met in the western forest that there was a small group of dashing *kamwimwi nyau* dancers. The *kamwimwi* were mysterious, semi-nude dancers of Zambian and Malawian origin who wore no zoomorphic masks. Instead, they smeared their faces and bodies with ashes and ochre before brandishing long thin sticks for beating members of the public. Their camps were always in graveyards to accord the dancers perpetual communion with the dead.

From graveyards, they approached rural settlements, possessed and frenetic. The dancers were notorious for wantonly whipping members of the public, especially women and children, and owed their existence to the government's tolerance of foreign cultures. They spotted red cloths and amulets around their ankles and wrists.

"The dancers are irrelevant to the search," the Sergeant ruled.

As the night progressed, ambivalent voices, quiet but persistent, were adamant Matipa wouldn't see Peza again. The voices told her it was anomic for a brute of Bomani's magnitude to keep a hostage alive, and moronic to assume he would. Her guess was the boy's remains would be found decapitated with some organs missing, especially the heart and genitalia. The police would've to exhume the

body from a shallow grave in the forest. A demon was incapable of hospitality. If Peza survived the initial assault, hunger, all forms of abuse and physical torture would eventually take his life. Perhaps by now the horde had severed his neck and drunk his blood.

Recalling her dream, she saw the eagle again. It snatched Peza in its pinions and soared away with him. The boy was limp. The blood left on his bedding was enough confirmation he was fatally injured. She dreaded receipt of the news of his death and would appreciate if nobody found his corpse at all, and she would've to inter the head of a goat in a symbolic grave.

A female neighbour brought her supper, placed it before her and urged her to eat; slightly falling short of telling her even the bereaved took food. Matipa gazed at the plate of *sadz'a* and vegetables until the neighbour, under the supposition she would eat later on, covered the thick maize meal porridge and its modest relish of cooked vegetables. The neighbour left.

Two women from Matipa's apostolic sect failed to coax her to eat. The women quietly and disjointedly sang songs that invited the mother of Jesus into the situation. Towards midnight, they began a monotonous song:

Kune dziva guru riri padombo.

(There's a mighty dam on a rock)

The mysterious song and the singing irritated Matipa. For the first time she tried to discern the song. What was the mighty dam on a rock? Where were the dam and the rock? What was the significance of the dammed water? The whole thing was enigmatic. All along, she had thought she understood her religion. Now she could see that the faith was as elusive as deciphering most of its songs. It was probably deceptive that the spirit of John the Baptist came to Africa and possessed Baba Johannes.

After midnight, when the singers had sung one indecipherable song after another, the women fell asleep. She heard an officer ordering members of the Support Unit to board their truck. The vehicle roared into life and left Sakis Mine.

At dawn, she heard the sound of Mr Keneas' jeep approaching. The Sergeant opened the door and stood on the threshold. "The officers are hungry and tired. I need to replace them. The brutes aren't likely to return. By now they've crossed many rivers and are untraceable."

Matipa only stared at him.

"I'm leaving behind two armed policemen to cater for the unexpected."

She continued to stare at him. The Sergeant turned and exited. Soon after, the mill manager's jeep drove away. However, her solace came from the presence of the two police officers left behind. The officers maintained a discreet watch on her door and people approaching the compound.

At about 8 am, Matipa came out of the house in her apostolic garments and ground-sweeping headscarf, the latter so essential that without it a woman couldn't enter sacred places or converse with a prophet of God. The two women in similar clothing assisted her to stand erect and walk. She quivered from despair and prolonged hunger like one deeply bereaved.

About nineteen hours had lapsed since Bomani seized Peza, but already hunger, grief and self-remorse had so eaten her that she was too feeble to stand on her own. Her temples and once-plump cheeks were beginning to sink. She resented herself for almost standing aside when the demon kidnapped her son.

Unfortunately, the horde had stricken when she was a week from her monthly periods. Perhaps menstrual blood would've saved her son. What would she have lost in giving him a measure of the sewage material? If a demon preferred to drink it that was its own despicable choice.

As she swayed from her dwelling in the arms of the women assisting her, head bowed and eyes perpetually glazed with tears, her thoughts roamed countless cul-de-sacs. She blamed herself for not heeding the prophet. The mental flashings of the abduction were like splashes of acid on her conscience now a raw wound.

“Where do you want to go, *Madzimai* Matipa?” the woman to her right asked her calmly.

With all the energy left in her, she shrugged them off, violently. “I must see Jatrophu. I must see him alone. Now go back or you’ll continue to impress it on me my son was killed.”

“But it’s dangerous for anyone to venture out,” pleaded the woman to her left. “Look, everyone is indoors except the police. The mill shut down.”

“I must see the prophet. I’ve questions. He might also give me a clue on where to look for Peza. At least he should be able to tell me if Peza is still alive or... or something has happened to him.” She began to cry anew, slumped and rolled on the ground. Red ochre discoloured her garments.

After a while, the women caught up with her and sat her up. They stooped over her, touching her shoulders, but she was beyond consolation and they lacked reassuring words to pacify her grief. Though she grieved over Peza, Matipa worried about Remegio. The elder said the acolyte was in critical but stable condition at Kadoma General Hospital’s Intensive Care Unit. Medical jargon irritated and confused her. She had no idea if a person in *a critical but stable condition* would live.

She wanted to pray for his survival but checked herself; there was no God to pray to. Earth and Heaven, everything, including her faith and religion, were deceptive. No deity worth his salt would’ve allowed the immolation and kidnapping. This was indeed an eye-opening experience for her: it was stupid and wrong to bank her faith in a God she had never seen or felt, a God whom only *Madzibaba* Jatrophu purportedly saw.

“It’s wrong! Wrong! Wrong!” she shouted.

The women above her exchanged quizzical glances and asked simultaneously, “What’s wrong, *Madzimai* Matipa?”

“I’ve told you to leave me alone. I don’t want to bite you.”

“Beware, *Madzimai* Matipa,” one of the women warned, “when one is in extreme happiness or sorrow, the Evil One can house himself in such a person. Carry your cross with dignity and sanity. A witch cannot do anything to anyone unless God has sanctioned it.”

“Yes,” said the other one, “We’re pencils in God’s hands.”

The women were waffling. What did they know about a nonexistent God? Matipa sealed her ears with her hands. She reflected on the events of the previous day. The images of Bomani striking Peza confronted her with harrowing repetition. The bitter conclusion that her son was dead suppressed all her other thoughts. She resumed rolling on the ground. She wanted to relive the incident from an optimistic perspective, of hope and courage in God, but there just was no way her mind could grasp that Peza could still be alive.

What has brought this mother of calamities into my life? Though she was wailing and rolling on the ground, the fear of her husband dogged her. Akar would strike her dead on breaking the news to him tantamount to saying she had failed at all costs to protect their only child from an evil she knew would come. *Oh, God, where art Thee... in Heaven or in Hell?*

Everything, from the intruder, burning Remegio, the blood on the shards of glass, to Peza on the floor, had appeared like figments of her imagination. While she gawked at the horror, the evil one had thrived. Surely Akar would skin and then eat her alive. He was a dangerous man no one could restrain.

Oh, fate hadn’t been kind to her; she shouldn’t have met Akar. The man was a curse in her life. *No, no, no!* A part of her mind protested. She should rue her parents in Mungorwenyi Village in Nyanga. She just wasn’t like most independent townswomen.

Modern women worked in offices, banks and supermarkets. Her parents had failed to enamour her of education. She would've been in an office somewhere, perhaps in the glassy and immaculate Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe skyscraper, handling some aspects of the country's economy or accounts. Had she been educated enough she could've been in an office somewhere, instead of doing menial work at a horticultural farm and fatefully coming across disastrous Akar Muja, the magnet that attracted the ruin in her life. Of course, he gave her enough money for groceries and other necessities, but he had hardly been there as a father and husband to support her.

Before the appearance of the demon, she had wanted him to return. Now she dreaded his coming. The predator would pounce on her. In the final analysis, it was probably because she had borne him a boy that Akar hadn't hitherto laid even a finger on her. He respected her for bearing him a son. However, now that she had let their only jewel slip through her fingers, she was sure Binga would devour her raw.

The two women pulled her up and dragged her back to her house.

Chapter 27

In the east, the rising sun was a nugget of molten gold, yoke-yellow and mesmerising, that squirted Binga's eyes. Looking forward to a romantic evening in Harare this day 30 November, he left PaGomo Heights in a taxi. It took him to the gate of the Kadoma Ranch Motel and Conference Centre, where he stood hitchhiking Harare-bound private traffic. Two cars stopped for him, but on seeing babies on board, he waved them away, baffling the motorists and the other occupants.

After about fifteen minutes from the time the taxi left him, a lady-driven double cab pick-up stopped for him. The vehicle had one passenger in the front seat, and no children. The vehicle pulled away as he exchanged greetings with the driver and the passenger, a middle-aged lean man in an elegant navy-blue business suit. From the conversation of the two, he learnt they were a married couple and guessed the husband was probably a lawyer. Perhaps they were travelling to attend the High Court in Harare.

They came to the rail-level crossing after Kadoma Police Camp. The warning signals were out of order and looked long vandalised. The car slowed down almost to a dead stop as the driver checked both sides of the tracks for railway traffic, and drove over.

Beyond the rail level crossing, vast farmland on both sides of the highway began, but the arable land had gone fallow. This was the ripening time for most crops planted at the start of the season, but the fields that once flourished before the controversial agrarian reforms were overgrown and turning into wild forests. Thorns, spear grass and bitter apple shrubs grew in the fields spelling death to the economy. The expansive maize and wheat fields that flanked the Harare-Bulawayo highway for decades used to be the country's commercial greenbelt.

They drove past the cloth-dyeing plant at Martin Spur. No smoke belched from its chimneys. The firm reeled from electricity blackouts. The country's power stations were underperforming due to a dearth of qualified and experienced engineers compounded by a critical scarcity of spare parts obtainable only in Germany and Britain, the country's sworn enemies according to some politicians.

As they were driving into Chegutu and parallel to the town's David Whitehead Textiles plant to the west, three traffic police officers stopped them for over-speeding. The LCD on the police officer's portable speed detector read sixty-four when sixty kilometres per hour was the lawful maximum on the stretch. The officers threatened to ticket them twenty dollars. The husband gave them two US dollars. The officers let them through.

The couple's conversation turned to the pathetic salaries the police officers and all the civil servants were getting. "I don't begrudge the police officers for the two-dollar bribe," the husband said. "It's like alms giving."

Binga wondered if a genuine diamond-rich country would fail to reward its civil servants. Though Zimbabwe was auctioning rough diamonds worth millions of US dollars every month, its exorbitant stockpile of the precious mineral continued to grow. He believed someone was being heartless.

"Our traffic police officers don't look poor," the wife said. "Their pendulous bellies betray an obvious fact: they're over-nourished and living outside their means."

"Most own expensive cell phones and fashionable cars."

The subject died when they stopped briefly for refreshments at a service station in the small farming town.

Not long after, they drove past Rosebud Garden Centre & Restaurant, the commercial entity reminding Binga of how he met Matipa and the romance that followed. Recalling the two hundred dollars he gave Ivy for onward transmission to her, he missed his

wife. The amount would content her for many weeks. He was a responsible husband and father, he thought.

Near Norton, they stopped at a tollgate. The woman paid one US dollar for passage. As they left the tollgate, which appeared like a refugee camp in its inception phase, the couple speculated the government was probably raising a lot of money through these gates; hence the sizeable security at the point. The husband said independent journalists brought it to the fore that the government misappropriated the revenue collected.

The couple talked about the economic sanctions, concurring they had shattered the economy and devalued the local currency, a reality that glared in everyone's eyes. As the car sped towards the city, Binga found himself thinking about the old war in the DRC. He suspected army generals siphoned Congolese diamonds, while he brought home festering wounds, gunshot scars and bitter memories. They went to mend things in the DRC only to return to their own country knee-deep in debt and wobbling from job-boycotts and the blows of prolonged electricity blackouts. The country's foreign military expenditure added a jab to an already falling beast. He didn't have to be an economist to understand that.

As they drove into Harare Binga thought he should've joined the flotsam of disgruntled emigrants to Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States. The emigrants had had foresight. They saw that Zimbabwe was a sinking *Titanic* and abandoned it. There were many jobs in the developed world, but if one wasn't an engineer, a doctor or a nurse, the job at their disposal was petty and menial.

Harare, formerly Salisbury, was now a lacklustre jewel. Exhaust emissions and lack of regular care discoloured the buildings. The roads were strings of dangerous potholes. Vendors lined the roads and litter was everywhere. Street children ran to beg from motorists at every robot-controlled intersection. The couple concurred the city was fast deteriorating into a rural British village. Binga thought the

entire country was gradually turning into an extended version of the Great Zimbabwe Ruins.

He paid the husband five dollars for the one hundred and fifty-kilometre journey and alighted at the taxi rank at Karigamombe Centre along Kwame Nkrumah Avenue. A taxi took him to a car rental agency in Greenwood. Binga was relieved to see a Toyota Prado and a Hilux 240D among the cars in the company's carport.

As he walked into the ornate reception of the agency, within he faced the truth; he loved Gillian. For the sake of impressing her, he was hiring a vehicle. By Christmas, he would've ceased renting vehicles. He would be a proud owner of a fleet of expensive cars. His thoughts continued to rivet on Gillian. He had always wanted to devour her sexually though he pretended he was different from men who craved sex, just to mystify her.

He had banked the desire for one long year now, torturing himself relentlessly because opportunities to be intimate with her had always presented themselves, but he had held back. A black mamba held back and struck when it wouldn't miss the mark. The serpent struck innumerable until the victim lay dead. If, in the throes of dying, a victim twitched a face or moved a finger, the mamba struck again repeatedly, every attack blackening the victim. The black mamba, his model, was a thorough killer. The sensation he felt hinted to him that the banked desire had accrued interest over the months.

Chapter 28

By noonday, the situation at the Mijas' homestead had the appearance of a funeral. More sympathizers conversing in low tones had gathered since morning to console Matipa. Four couples from the apostolic sect including *Madzibaba* Tinashe sat in her sitting room. The elder was tense and grim-faced. Mr Emedhi, the officer janitor and errands man, and *Madzimai* Tryfin, the sect woman who warned her against Akar two years ago, were among the well-wishers together with three other non-religious neighbours. Matipa avoided looking at the woman.

The door was wide open. Everyone kept a wary eye outside, some craning their necks to see the people approaching the house, ready to dash to their dwellings or take refuge in the surrounding forest should the devils re-emerge. Outside sat five men on stools and four women on mats and goatskins. They spoke quietly and lacked epithets to describe the horror of the previous day.

Because the people sat on all the available seats, Matipa sat on a reed mat stifling the fright that gripped her when she recalled Bomani pronouncing his name. She could still hear his menacing pronunciation that sent shrapnel in her heart. Perhaps his voice too carried demons. What could exorcise Bomani's voice from her mind? Certainly, he was on the behest of demons; to be courteous, smile and seek to kill at the same time was supernatural.

None of the people present talked about attacking the horde should it return. Matipa wanted to hear the men talking about decapitating the savages and impaling their bodies. She died to hear talk of immolating the brutes and whipping them raw before they died. Word had reached her that some teenagers and young men had planned a counter-attack and would bury the devils in Sakis Mine, but with the adults cowering and the young men nowhere in sight, it was unbelievable. She hated all the men in the compound. When she

lunged at Bomani and grabbed his leg, men ought to have mobbed the devil, complementing her effort. The men were only images of men.

However, despite their fear, the sympathizers had convinced Matipa to eat and avert starvation and turmoil-aggravated death. In their baseless arguments, they said if she were to die from depriving herself of food, God wouldn't be pleased with her, and it would destroy Peza to return to a motherless home. For the sake of Peza, she was now eating, and it came as a relief to her because hunger had begun to ravage her within.

She realised that despite the dejection she felt, the fear of the Lord had stealthily crept into her again. She didn't know if she were to celebrate its return or curse herself for allowing it, but in the back of her mind she was obstinate the God praised and worshipped in the twenty-first century was a pale shadow of the God the biblical prophets bowed to in prayer. Seemingly, an idol had displaced that God.

Through the door, she saw an armed police officer, one of the two details left in the compound, keeping watch over the house, and it brought her relief. People served the officers water and meals.

To fathom the crises squarely, it was expedient for her to understand the odds and speculate on the worst that could possibly happen, and try to come to terms with it. The attempt catapulted her on that maelstrom of self-dejection and the conclusion that Peza was dead. She was to blame, not her husband or Bomani. From the onset, greed and brutality had corrupted their existence as husband and wife. As a Christian, she should've kept him in check on learning he was evil and lived by the axe. She should've asked him to repent or left him if he remained bent on terrorising illegal gold diggers. Instead, she had stuck to him as if they were Siamese twins joined at the sternum, thus she had jeopardised herself and Peza.

By hearing no evil and seeing no evil, she had positioned her son perilously. Breakfasting on sausages, oats and omelettes had blinded

and deafened her. Everyone around them was envious of them until now. Again, she saw in a different light that they had never been husband and wife, but man and his long-time maid-cum-bed partner. All the years of their marriage, she had stood as an unpaid house minder and hearer of his iniquities.

Did Akar love her? She tried to think if he loved her but was incapable of expressing it reasonably. Several times, in bed, he had misfired and called her Norma. It sickened and drained all the excitement out of her. She went livid with anger and felt like spitting in his face, wrecking all the household property and torching the house. She couldn't imagine a worse insult to a woman. Her face would contort and she would attempt to slide him from her, all the while demanding to know who Norma was, but he clung to her like a limpet. Before he answered, it was typical of him to laugh. Stuttering, he told her Norma didn't exist at all, but was a Hollywood star he noticed in a movie at the cinema and fell in love with the character, not the person, giving Matipa the impression of an unwelcome fantasy that had crept into their bedroom. She made it a habit to censor him with her eyes when he made the utterances. He countered by avoiding names and calling her sweetie, honey, chocolate and darling, an obvious yet not so obvious precaution.

She should've left this infidel and brute before trouble visited them. However, quitters, especially women, were losers. Only proven adultery on the part of a woman warranted divorce. Under customary law, a woman had no basis to divorce her husband. She should've fled him years ago before the prophecy and the advent of Bomani.

Returning to her parents in the remote rural village wouldn't have helped her. They'd have sent her back with an elderly escort to settle whatever dispute was in her marriage, or Akar could've followed her and beaten her and her parents inert for depriving him of his conjugal rights. Some men were in the habit of corporally disciplining in-laws they considered foolish and a snag in their marriage. She had feared for her parents.

Presently, when she emerged from the world of reflections, Mr Emedhi was speaking, almost addressing everybody in the room.

“Mr Keneas asked me to visit Remegio at the hospital,” he was saying. “He should’ve driven there himself to see how the boy is coping, but he said he should be here at the mine to complement the police. Operations have stopped. The mill manager isn’t a happy man. I’ve never seen him so distraught.”

A male member of the apostolic sect asked, “Does he think the gang will return with armed policemen in the compound?”

“Mr Keneas is taking no chances,” answered the orderly. “This morning he dismantled and cleaned his pistol. The man can shoot the head of a hare hundred metres away. Though he cannot miss the head of a man, he’s going for the chest to avoid wasting chances. Let them return, they’ll leave this place in stainless steel coffins.”

“I don’t think Bomani spoke empty words,” Matipa said thoughtfully. “They’ll definitely return. I suppose this time they’ll torch many people and houses.”

Mr Emedhi spoke with conviction, “If the policemen can’t then the mill manager will stop them, rest assured. I don’t know why you call them demons. These young men probably sniff glue and take drugs.”

“I agree,” chipped in *Madzibaba* Tinashe. “But only a demon can seek to displease God. The horde is against religious gatherings. I’m a man of flesh and blood; I cannot fight on behalf of God. Prophet Nahum wrote, *what do ye imagine against the Lord? He’ll make an utter end: affliction shall not rise up the second time.*”

“No one knows when God’ll fight back, *Madzibaba*,” said Mr Emedhi quietly. “Overseas Hitler roasted the Jews in ovens but God didn’t intervene. God says you’ve everything at your disposal, don’t bother Me.” He coughed and looked about. “When a snake strays into your house, do you kneel down and pray or do you kill it?”

His audience remained silent and pensive.

“The battle lines are drawn,” Mr Emedhi continued. “Remegio is in the Intensive Care Unit. Savages are at large with a minor. Aren’t any of us descendants of warriors?”

Everyone remained mum.

“All of us should be out in the forest hunting the gang until the boy is recovered, dead or alive. You make me hate the bible; it turns men into cockroaches. Prayers from your type inflict sores on God’s ears and tire Him.” Mr Emedhi was visibly angry.

Of him, the prophet said he would split heads open with an axe. Perhaps this vile condemnation was the prelude. The silence continued for a long while. Mr Emedhi clicked his tongue in anger and shifted his feet restlessly.

“I must see the prophet today,” Matipa said, breaking the tension and silence. “I can’t afford to live in uncertainty. He must tell me Peza’s fate, or at least where to recover his body.”

“The prophet isn’t seeing anyone today,” said *Madzibaba* Tinashe. “I visited him this morning. He sent his family away for a day or two because he’s special prayers at his homestead. The prophet emphasised he needed solitude today and tomorrow. I think it’s about the disturbance.”

“I must see him. He knows where my son is.”

“I advise you to visit him the day after tomorrow, *Madzimai* Matipa. You might get to his homestead when he’s already in communion with angels in the third or fourth heaven. You’ll not be able to communicate with him.”

Mr Emedhi laughed sarcastically, his shoulders jerking. “The wish to be prophesied is your falling, all of you. Your *righteous* prophet said I’d kill people. I didn’t solicit for this prophecy. To this day, I haven’t killed a dog, worse still, chicken. I wonder what kind of marijuana this man could be smoking. But, if I had money in the bank, I could’ve sued him for making people shun me and regard me with suspicion.” He paused and regarded the believers. “Don’t worry. Tell

the joker the year is about to end. I'll make a public spectacle of this devil on 31 December."

"Your words, Mr Emedhi," Matipa protested, "are they not an evil omen my son is dead?"

Mr Emedhi rose and stormed out of the dwelling. Eyes followed him outside until he vanished into his sleeping hut, which faced the Muja's house. However, outside was something unusual: the vulture, the forerunner of evil. The bird was on the same shrub and twig, staring at the Muja's house. They gawked at it, but only for a while. Melancholy settled on the observers inside and outside. Feet shuffled on the floor. Beginning with *Madzibaba* Tinashe, all the people left one by one for the safety of their dwellings. Matipa heard them running away.

This was her house, her last line of defence. In her husband's absence this was her war; her life and her son's were in danger. Resolving to kill the scavenger, she rose and hurried into the bedroom, came out with Akar's crude catapult, and headed for the exit. On the edge of the threshold, she picked a pebble the size of a peach seed, and placed it in the leather strapping. The vulture ogled at her.

Growing up, she had favoured and preferred the company of boys and had used catapults extensively in the village. At first, she was only skilled enough to hit squirrels and hares. Then she learnt how to strike tufted guinea fowls, doves, mice and finally jetting swallows. That was many years ago when she was in her girlhood. She believed the skill hadn't deserted her.

Framed in the doorway, she closed an eye, aimed at the bird and pulled the dual elastic bands. When the vulture was squarely in the fork and level with the stretched bands, she held her breath and released the pebble. A split second later, the bird hopped into the air in an attempt to fly, but some of its brown plumage flew away. It flapped its wings falteringly, gaining significant height, but tumbled headlong towards the ground.

She ran to it and pinned it down with her foot. The bird was bigger than a full-grown hen. It struggled to break free. She bludgeoned its head with a piece of rock. The bird continued to thrust its legs, and she continued to grind its head, loudly cursing in the name of Jesus Christ the devil she believed was in the vulture, until it was dead, and the scavenger's blood covered her hands and feet. When she looked up, she saw many people watching the spectacle from the safety of their dwellings. No sooner had she returned to her dwelling than a neighbour's dog came running and whisked away the carcass of the bird.

Though the forerunner was dead, Matipa locked and bolted the door and closed all windows, but it didn't feel safe. Bomani and his men could burn her alive inside the house. She returned to peer outside through cracks in the main door.

Chapter 29

At two o'clock when he had had lunch at a cafeteria on the mezzanine floor of ultra-modern Eastgate shopping mall, and was through with shopping, Binga drove out of Greater Harare in his hired air-conditioned Toyota Hilux. He took the Harare-Beit Bridge highway and turned left into Mbudzi Cemetery after driving for twenty-five minutes. The sprawling graveyard was devoid of people except for three groups of mourners and gravediggers in a flung area with fresh graves. He parked the car, locked it and strolled away from the people like a nostalgic relative visiting the grave of a dear one.

The graves were numerous and disorderly. While some were Jewish-like and imposing with their polished granite headstones, the majority were mounds of earth with rusty, beaten dishes and cups. On spotting a grave resembling a cairn, he turned to it and began removing stones from its side, creating room for the axe. He placed the weapon in the stony mound, covered it with the stones and straightened to inspect the effect of the rearrangement. A casual observer wouldn't see that someone tampered with the grave and planted something in it.

Having complied with the stipulation for storing the axe, Binga drove towards Seke in the dormitory town of Chitungwiza to the east. Gillian would be pleased with him. He had bought her a new Internet-ready Toshiba laptop she had always wanted for her studies. The computer cost him one thousand one hundred dollars. On parting with the amount, he had known he was indeed in love with Gillian. He wondered how she would react, but he was sure the groceries, the laptop and other pleasantries would leave her speechless. She was young and about to grasp what it felt like to be in love with a real man who could differentiate between the needs and wants of a woman; a man who understood a lady had to be satisfied

in every aspect. A man lined a woman's purse with banknotes of the highest value, filled her heart with serenity, stuffed her handbag with cosmetics and perfumes and packed her days with romance.

How love was painful in his heart was both weird and pleasant. The desire to lay his eyes and hands on Gillian punished him. In all honesty, he saw she had long become the reason for his existence, which was why he was visiting her loaded with the green dollar. Though he tried to deny the fact, reason prosecuted him: if Matipa, Peza, Nomathemba, or anyone of them, mattered the most, then naturally they ought to have been the ones he was visiting to wipe their tears. Money wiped all kinds of tears.

The drive to Chitungwiza was eventless, and there was nothing to sightsee along the road, so Binga went through the details of the robbery. He was going to smuggle a big duffle bag, a stick of dynamite and an ignition fuse into the Louvre. Inside the Grand Gallery, he would cause a false fire alarm by lighting a cigarette near a smoke sensor. The walls and ceiling of the Louvre had many of them. The sirens would scare out all the tourists and general staff of the museum. All exits would open automatically for the largest number of people to exit in the shortest time possible.

As monitors in the computer and CCTV room of the complex singled out the source of the alarm and directed resident fire-fighting personnel to the Grand Gallery, Binga would blow the thick Plexiglas protecting the *Mona Lisa* with a stick of dynamite attached to a five-second fuse. To protect himself from the blast's debris, he would dash behind one of the pillars in the chamber. Before the smoke cleared, he would pull the masterpiece from the wall, which would trigger a different set of alarms in the Louvre's corridors, CCTV room, the offices of a rapid response private security company and the nearest police station. Impenetrable iron gates would fall on all the exits from the Grand Gallery, barricading them and sealing him inside. He would sprinkle the masterpiece with a special charm from

the Sufi hermit. Leonardo da Vinci's painting would become invisible, so would he after applying the charm on himself.

The museum's CCTV cameras were going to capture him on entry and as he walked the lengthy passages of the complex among many other tourists. They were going to capture him as he caused the fire and stood before the Plexiglas, but video surveillance would inexplicably lose him and the *Mona Lisa*. He was sure from the unprecedented video glitch, which security experts were going to rule a deliberate ploy by a syndicate of museum staff; authorities would focus investigations on an inside job.

In invisible mode, he would dodge the puzzled security personnel and French police details until the barricades opened. He would exit the Louvre through the least used exit point, the three stairs on other side of the Arc de Triomphe Carrousel. Only avoiding bumping into the people who couldn't see him and his loot would be his greatest challenge, but that was manageable. Once outside the museum, the rest was easy. He was going to dismantle the gilded frame, superimpose the portrait of Pope Benedict XVI, a natural affection of many Frenchmen and Italians, on the masterpiece. Then he would courier the artwork in two packages, one for the frame, and the other for the disguised canvas, to a hotel address in New York City. While France's security experts studied the video clips from cameras in the Salle des Etats, Binga Jochoma would be touching down on American soil aboard a Boeing 747 supersonic jet.

Binga smiled, pleased with himself, juju and his lateral thinking. Many professional robbers, scientific and educated syndicates, had tried without success to rob the Louvre, especially of the *Mona Lisa*. Throughout its legendary history, the robbers stole the masterpiece only twice. This time no one would find it again. If ever the French found it, it would've left his custody and he would be a rich man.

Lately, he had read in a newspaper that the president of Italy's National Committee for Cultural Heritage revealed to a press conference that art detectives took a fresh look at the painting and

discovered microscopic symbols in its eyes. New investigative techniques showed that hidden in the dark paint of her eyes were tiny letters and numbers by Leonardo da Vinci's brush. In her right eye were the letters LV, suspected to stand for the grandmaster's initials. In the left eye were other symbols, but not as definable as those in the right. The detectives discovered other symbols in the bridge of the *Mona Lisa's* nose. The discoveries meant intrigue and value addition to the painting. Such mystery could double or triple the value of the artwork. He would be richer than he had expected initially.

About half an hour later, he left the highway, drove steadily along streets teeming with playful children, drunkards, and ridiculously dressed staring prostitutes. The streets gurgled with raw sewage. Remnants of political posters of the previous election marred many buildings and billboards. Sloganeering graffiti defaced road signs.

After many exhaustive turns, the Gadagas' house appeared before him, an un-plastered longitudinal house sitting on less than two hundred square metres. Like most of the houses in the town, the architecture wasn't awe-inspiring. Had it not been for the curtained windows and a three-arch veranda, a European tourist could easily mistake the house for an agricultural storeroom. The property was fenced and gated. By the end of January next year, he would've bought his future in-laws a sprawling house in Glen Lorne or Greystone, upper-class suburbs in the north of Harare.

However, there was something unusual: men and women sat in small groups outside the Gadagas' house. A bonfire burned in the property's small forecourt. Some people were in the family's mediocre sofas and chairs, all outside. This was reminiscent of a funeral gathering. Someone at the house had died. He hoped it wasn't Gillian. The importance of cellular communication struck him. Had he been in constant communication with his sweetheart, he could've known everything. Gillian could've contacted him for help before

someone became gravely ill, but he had lied to her saying that he was a shadow, a security agent.

When he stopped the car near the gate, all eyes settled on him. He scanned the faces for Gillian's or any of her siblings. Where was she? Where was Godwin, Bertha, Nigel and the Grade 4 twins, Bevan and Ruben?

He stepped out of the car and deliberately took time to lock it expecting someone to come and meet him. No one did. As he walked through the gates, a teary Gillian emerged from the house, ran and embraced him, holding him firmly as if he wanted to break free and bolt.

Despite the funereal atmosphere, he felt the tips of her breasts pressing against his lower chest. She sobbed on his chest. He put an arm around her. It seemed the proper reaction, but he remained mum. A libidinal fire that had lain dormant in him for a long time flared.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"Uncle Jackson is dead, Ralph. He died here yesterday. He maintained he was innocent and God was his witness." She paused and looked into his eyes. "Father told us after he died that he was impotent, a fact he shied from telling the court. If he had disclosed it, state doctors could've verified it and the courts could've acquitted him. But he found it humiliating."

"I'm so sorry."

With Gillian holding his hand, Binga went round the yard shaking people's hands and murmuring his condolences. These people were the family's relatives and close friends, the exact people he died to please for the sake of Gillian. Because he had arrived in an expensive car, they looked at him in awe, and shook his hand with respect and humility. He was glad he was loaded with money.

Inside the house, a group of women began to sing a low, lugubrious Catholic chorus to the tune of a drumbeat. Gillian led him

into the house where her parents and blood relatives would be sitting.
He had never been inside the house. This was momentous.

Chapter 30

Soon after sunset, Matipa left the compound for Prophet Jatropha's homestead. There was no one to restrain her. In her apostolic garments and headscarf, she quickly walked towards the obelisk and vanished in the forest. Her garments flared in an easterly breeze. The previous day she conversed at length with a live demon. In the morning, she had killed the vulture. It would be insane of her to fear ghosts. Peering through cracks in the door, she had expected Bomani and his team to arrive. They didn't. However, if indeed the vulture was Bomani's forerunner, she suspected she had frustrated his wizardry by killing the bird.

On the way, she asked herself again if Akar Muja loved her, concluding invariably that all these years they had been master and his maid-cum-bed partner. In the last three years, she had been nothing but an unpaid house cleaner of his doubling as his woman of comfort. He was hardly home, exactly why Bomani was able to kidnap Peza.

Then she questioned the omnipresence of God. Was it possible a demon could kidnap the child of a believer? Something was terribly wrong. They were chances the sect was prostrating to a devil; the Devil didn't protect his flock. How then did she ever become apostolic? By default, she understood. The faith was different from mainstream Christianity. They sang songs in praise of angels and worshipped Archangel Gabriel and Michael. There was a wide chance sect members were despicable before God, she thought.

She saw how she used to be upright before God, and called no other name than Christ. On coming to Sakis Mine, the Devil had slipped her into error. He deprived her of her denomination and voided the place of possible substitutes.

The prophet would tell her where her son was, or she would strip naked and shame him. For that reason, she was going to his

homestead without underwear. If his answers were crooked, she would tell him he was an agent of the Devil.

She might have been too preoccupied to notice and strain from the swift pace at which she was walking. The prophet's isolated homestead appeared in no time. All the huts were unlit except for a detached one from which the unmistakable voice of the prophet issued. Its door, a collection of longitudinally planks amateurishly put together, had wide gaps that let out shards of light. He was shouting or pleading in exasperation. On getting closer, she learnt he was lamenting on top of his voice. The compulsion not to intrude on *Madzibaba* Jatroph'a's privacy nearly got the better of her. This man had driven his family away for a couple of days as explained by *Madzibaba* Tinashe. What category of prayers was he pursuing that wasn't even suitable for the ears of his family? Now driven by curiosity, by the gate she paused and listened.

"You blessed Baba Johannes with eloquence and the gift of prophecy! He walked this earth a powerful man in truth and in spirit to the eyes of man! Territorial spirit mediums bore witness he was the light that fell on this continent for the redemption of the African! With him, you walked, like inseparable twins, and he performed miracles, casting evil spirits and healing the sick! The future he foretold in precision, which earned him the respect of chiefs and mediums! Oh, Edah and you Edampesi, why do you turn your back on me? If this were a den of lions I'd have been devoured by now!" His voice was rising. "Storms toss me right, left and centre! The vulture you gave me as my third eye is dead!"

Matipa held her bosom.

"Where are you, Edah? Where are you, Edampesi? Oh, gods, are your ears without hearing? From little resources, I've appeased your thirst with millet beer and sacrifices of blood! I've cast snuff on the ground to ease your craving for ground tobacco! In return you seek to make the world turn against me!"

Matipa froze, thunderstruck with the prayer. She couldn't believe her ears. The prayer was a plain confirmation their faith wasn't Christian. He had lamented the killing of the vulture. The scavenger had been his. This man delved in witchcraft. Nausea rose in her. She remained frozen.

After a brief pause, the prophet broke into a familiar song. They had sung it on several occasions at the shrine and in their homes. He sang it quietly, mournfully:

Ndidaire Edah, kudenga kuna Isaka
Ndidaire Edah, ndonofira mativi mana.
Edah, Edah, kudenga kuna Isaka.
Ndidaire Edah, ndonofira mativi mana.

(Answer me Edah; in Heaven is Isaac
Answer me Edah, I'll die in faraway places.
Edah, Edah, in Heaven is Isaac.
Answer me Edah, I'll die in faraway places)

Immediately, he continued in his rhetoric, "Mudiyiwa, whose spiritual name you decreed Emmanuel, succeeded Baba Johannes! He performed enumerable miracles! Margaret Thatcher witnessed the miracles in this country! You overwhelmed Emmanuel and he hanged himself in his sect's main shrine! Now that you bring rival spirits in the community for the sole purpose of exposing me in the eyes of the believers, do you seek to overwhelm me into taking my life? I demand the power you gave to Pharaoh's magicians! Edah and all you who dwell in the spiritual realm, name your price!"

Again, he sang a single-line lyric but as drawn and as sorrowful as before. He sang it repeatedly in sharp falsetto, baritone and soprano, varying tempos like one possessed.

Kana ndichichema ndidairewo.

(When I lament, please answer me)

Matipa tiptoed towards the lit hut, her heart pounding. Who would believe her? If she told believers what she had heard, everyone would think her demonic and a tool in the hands of Satan. She squatted beside a large earthen jar of water near the door similar to another one on the other side, and peered inside through a gap between the doorpost and the wall.

Two kerosene lamps lit the hut. Except for his head, a red cloth covered Prophet Jatrophah. He was in the centre of the room almost bereft of furniture apart from an old wooden and rickety chair on whose seat were necklaces of red and black beads and a heavily beaded gourd. The prophet was kneeling before two earthen vessels and the mummified head of an animal whose mouth was agape and eyes were staring. He picked the head in one hand and brushed its hairs with the other. The sharp incisors, the long, pointed ears, the black nose and dark eyes that looked like sunless planets convinced Matipa it was the head of a hyena.

“*Madzibaba* Philip and James succeeded Emmanuel,” he said solicitously to the head. He was no longer shouting. “You prescribed they spend nine years in the wilderness, but after seven years, you persuaded them to return to the people with the spiritual gifts you gave them. Some, you gave the utterances of Enoch and Paul, and the sect thrived! Some, you gave the personality and stutter of Moses. You silenced the territorial spirits of Nehanda, Chaminuka and Matangira.” He fell silent and wiped his face with a flap of the red cloth.

She realised he was crying.

“You gave me Angel Isaiah for the purported utterances of the Messiah. What’s prophecy without the requisite gifts of healing and power over rivalry spirits? From the day I made a covenant with you, you impressed it on me I had dominion... that no other spirits, *Gule*

Wamkulu or otherwise, would subdue the people I preside over on your behalf. You gave me tongues and made me king. Is this the anti-climax you had in mind?”

This wasn’t for her eyes and ears only. She resolved to return to the compound and bring someone, or a bunch of believers. From the look of it, Jatropha had devoted the entire night to his lamentations. They were likely to find him at it, but when she was rising, she knocked the jar of water with her knee. The container fell on its side, shattered and spilled the water. Inside the hut, the prophet fell silent. She wanted to run away, but her legs were shaking.

The door to the hut flung open. The prophet stood framed in the doorway, behind him the backdrop of light. “How long have you been here, *Madzimai* Matipa?” His voice was calm, but wrapped in a red cloth he was menacing.

She sank to the ground and knelt in humility despite herself. That was what three years of apostolic worship had conditioned her to do, and she couldn’t lie to him. “I’ve been here long enough to hear everything.”

“*Madzimai* Matipa, what did you hear and what did you see?”

“I saw the head of the hyena you were talking to.”

“I’m doing these things for your sake, *madzimai*...for Peza.” He paused and burst into a cataract of tongues, abruptly stopped and said, “You’re angry. I see you’ve come to add rebellion to your sins. Like a droplet of ink in a glass of water, anger has filled you to the crown of your head. Anger stems from Satan, the Serpent. Pay him no attention when he seduces you.”

“But you can’t tell me that, you’re in league with Satan!”

He laughed coldly. “Is it not written we’re gods? If you knew the secret, you would move mountains. Why did Jesus curse an innocent fig-tree he rightly found without fruit because it wasn’t the fruition season?”

The abrupt question confounded her for some seconds. She grasped it was a deliberate and cunning ploy to confuse her. “Ask the head of a hyena inside the hut.”

“Why are you here when scriptures no longer appeal to your senses?”

“Tell me the reason I came if you’re a prophet?”

He chuckled. “You came to find out if your son is still alive. You came to learn where you could find him but, alas, you busy yourselves with matters of no consequence to the recovery of your son. The Bible is God’s voice to us. Prayers are our voice to God, but you’ve the temerity to eavesdrop on sacred prayers. I can make you deaf, blind and dumb now, and it would be interesting to see how you’d report what you saw here this evening.”

“I’ve not come to fight or to entertain the multiplication of my woes.”

“What’re woes? You’ve none whatsoever. Set your eyes on things that are in Heaven, not on things that are earthly, and you’ll see that you’ve no woes. People the world over suffer because their focus is mundane. Isn’t it written we should give thanks in all circumstances and not be anxious over anything?”

With intimidation and biblical snippets, he was boggling her. Kneeling before a man who practised witchcraft, she found herself in an awkward position. “You’ve told me my mission, but you haven’t answered my pertinent questions. Is Peza alive? Where do I find him or his body?”

“That vulture you killed should’ve led you to him. It died with its knowledge. Its blood is on your hands.”

Resentment rose in her. “Are you a Man of God or the Devil?”

He didn’t respond.

“Answer me if you’re not a sorcerer.”

“Is it Judgment Day already, *Madzimai*? Judge not and God’ll not judge you. I’m a man. Like all men, the light of God is in me. Your

son is alive. The vulture is dead. Allow me to return to my prayers.” He gestured to her to rise.

She did, but she felt wretched within.

“You were privileged to see the hidden. Utter no word to anyone.”

On the ground, in the shaft of light cast from the hut, she saw a piece of rock the size of a clinched fist. It was a few paces from her. She dashed, picked it up and turned around to smash his forehead, but the prophet jumped inside the hut and slammed the door shut, leaving her staring at the door and its shards of light. Inside the hut was *darkness*, and she was going to deal with it physically. Because of wicked people like Jatropa, evil had visited the compound. She stoned the other jar by the door, shattering and spilling the water.

“By the power vested in me, I order you to go away, woman!” he shouted from the hut. “Every prophet is very dangerous. Bolts of lightning and swarms of killer bees are at my disposal!”

“Deceiver, don’t further infuriate me with your utterances!”

She ran to his sacred place of worship in a corner of the yard and trampled on earthen vessels, breaking them. Three she flung at the lit hut, shattering them.

The prophet shouted inside the hut, “You’re inviting more calamities in your family!”

“Shut up, witch-doctor!”

“Go away or you’ll court disaster all the days of your life!”

“What life are you talking about? My son is probably dead. I don’t know where my husband is! I’ve no future! What could be more disastrous than this?”

“Your husband is with a young woman! A beautiful student is milking him dry! You’re not the only one who calls him husband!”

The words fuelled her anger and resentment. She found a worn out shovel lying on the ground and used it to cut down and fragment the cactus tree, the main feature of the shrine. She drew up her garment and urinated all over the erstwhile sacred ground, like a

deranged goat too impatient to relieve itself steadily. Her anger didn't subside and she felt she hadn't desecrated the place enough. This satanic prophet and his shrine were the magnets that had attracted Bomani to Sakis Mine.

The prophet's threats mounted, "I've already coerced Death and calamity to haunt you till you die in a car crash as you leave Sakis Mine for Mungorwenyi Village! Leave that shrine alone! If you knew what was good for your family, you would find ways to trace your husband in Seke before his young and learned mistress blinds him with her supple body! Her breasts are pointed arrows!"

The words were acerbic. When she set her eyes on the lit hut again, an idea struck her. She would torch the hut. Normally she carried a box of matches in her brassiere. She cupped her breasts with her hands, feeling them, they were loose; she wasn't wearing undergarments, she remembered. She was determined to raze the hut down, if the devil elected to perish in the fire he would die in it.

She ran to the homestead's kitchen, a central hut, and burst in, startling a goat that ran out into the darkness. The room was dark. There wasn't a fire in the hearth, not even the dying glow of embers. She dashed out and ran across a maize field towards the homestead of Jatropa's nearest neighbour, a sworn Moslem of Malawian origin. The crop was knee-high. In the darkness, she trampled the crop, but this was devious Jatropa's field.

The Malawian's homestead was a stone throw away. She could see it clearly, together with the smoke bellowing from the apex of the cooking hut. Time was a premium; the prophet was chanting, likely seeing her intentions and trying to counter all her moves. He could turn her blind or kill her before she reached the homestead. Though she was no longer youthful, as attested by her calves and thighs that were beginning to hurt, she ran with all her strength, her life depended on it. Twice she stumbled, and twice she picked herself up and ran. The homestead loomed. Chattering, excited voices came from the cooking hut whose door was wide open for ventilation.

How would she break it to the Moslem without losing precious time? No, she would explain after accomplishing her mission.

The Moslem, Abraham Madi, was Jatropa's sworn enemy. Of the Chewa tribe and Taliban in his adherence to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, the community feared the pint-sized man. It perceived him as an enigma and possible sorcerer. Because there wasn't a mosque in the area, every Friday he led his family in chanting Islamic prayers loudly. People believed he did it to irk the prophet who lived less than two hundred metres away. He prayed aloud and read the Koran on top of his voice. The neighbours couldn't discern anything; he read and prayed in Arabic, in the language of Ishmael and Isa, which was what pleased Allah, so he said. The Malawian had always maintained the eon for miracles and prophecies ended when Prophet Muhammad, an illiterate man, wrote a large portion of the Koran.

Matipa knew that the enemy of one's enemy was one's friend. The Moslem, she recalled as she ran, often told those who cared to listen, that by Jatropa's hand calamity would someday visit Sakis Mine, the surrounding mines and farmlands. He believed the prophet wasn't a Man of God and Christianity was a religion based on falsehoods and a collection of male chauvinistic books written and edited by man. She had hated him for his blatant and unqualified utterances against a Man of God. Now, ironically, the fire to destroy the works of the devil would come from the Moslem's homestead.

When she burst into the kitchen where the Islamic family of about twelve sat, children and women screamed and fell back. Matipa supposed they took her for an apparition in her white garments. The kitchen was a large hut with a diameter of about six metres. Facing the door and built into the round wall was a multi-partitioned tall shelf for dishes and utensils. Two cooking pots leaning against each other stood on firestones. Tongues of fire licked their bottoms and lit the hut. Madi wasn't in the hut. The screams died suddenly.

She stopped at the hearth and drew a burning log. Sparks and smithereens of fire flew from the log as red-hot embers broke from it. Everyone held his or her breath fearfully, but in no time, she was out again and running, the wind fanning the log. Near the edge of the unfenced yard, she looked over her shoulder and saw that the family had crowded at the door and was watching her. A diminutive figure emerged from a detached hut, probably Madi responding to the screams. She kept running, retracing her invisible footprints in the maize field.

Madi shouted something in Chewa. His family and he gave chase. The Moslem was in a long shirt reaching to the knees and split on the sides, baggy plain trousers and a white skullcap. He was old and too laboured to run. Fear curbed his family from overtaking him. "In the name of Allah, stop!" he shouted.

When she didn't slow down or look back, he began to curse her in Arabic. Younger voices, following and nervous, called her a shameless witch. The distance between them continued to widen. When Matipa reached prophet Jatropha's homestead, she was tired and her lungs threatened to burst. He was still inside the hut; she could hear him speaking in tongues, bellowing like a bull and whistling.

Fortuitously, the log now burned with yellow and blue tongues of fire. She torched the grass-thatched roof, beginning from the entrance and quickly going round. The entire roof hissed and crackled, but the prophet remained inside, chanting in unknown languages. Standing guard near the door, the log still in her hand, she thought he had decided to die in the fire, and his evil spirits had bidden it. However, there were chances he was fireproof. In his popular demonstrations of the might of the spirit over flesh, he had stomped barefoot on glowing cork tree embers until they died down.

The hut turned into a large torch, rousing hundreds of minstrel birds from their nests in surrounding trees. In a hubbub of flapping wings, the birds flew away. The homestead and a large area around it

were almost rendered day. The tongues of fire lengthened and the heat intensified to unbearable levels. She felt the heat on her facial skin as if the fire was inches from her, and stepped back several paces.

Distantly, she feared he would die in the inferno. If he died, the courts would adjudge her a murderess and despatch her to the gallows. *What would it profit me to prevail over evil and then hang for it? Cursed is he who hangs on a tree.* By killing him in the fire, she was sinning against God. Matipa couldn't forgive herself.

As the roof curved in, he began to cough hysterically. He kicked down the door and shot at her blindly like a rampaging bull, the red cloth on fire. No, he wasn't trying to attack her. This was a desperate man's bolt for his life. The swaying flames were behind him, and the outline of his figure was a rushing silhouette. She could've swung the log at his forehead, but she wasn't a murderess. She stepped aside and he sped past her, but as he passed her, she grabbed the red cloth sliding from his shoulders. Johnson Fichani alias Prophet Jatropa ran out of the cloth completely naked. He ran towards the approaching Islamic family led by Abraham Madi. The rogue prophet ran in the light of his *darkness* going up in smoke, his head bobbing, his papery buttocks flaring.

She shook her head at his appalling, pitiable figure. His legs were thin and his upper body was a collection of countable ribs and jutting shoulder blades. A life of fasting to please unrewarding demons had left him skeletal. Beyond the scoundrel, she saw the Moslem in the maize field. The arson attack had scared him and his family, and he was now approaching slowing and cautiously. Then Abraham Madi saw the naked man running towards him. The diminutive man halted and shouted a panicky cry in Chewa, made a U-turn and ran towards his homestead. His family scurried in different directions, again screaming in panic.

As Johnson Fichani alias Prophet Jatropa vanished into the darkness, Matipa knew life at Sakis Mine and the surrounding areas

wouldn't be the same again. She looked over her shoulder. The hut burned; tongues of fire breaking free and leaping skywards. She couldn't believe her guts in touching the hut. However, in the back of her mind it was clear the night was giving birth to a strange season. Perhaps in the eyes of God she was now a notable and would attract His favour.

Chapter 31

On waking up, Bomani clicked his tongue in anger. His failure to find Binga at Sakis Mine was his waking thought. Partly out of anger and partly as bait, he had kidnapped Peza, but his vein of anger wasn't exhausted. At thirty-two years old, and having hunted men, subdued or killed them for five years now, he didn't believe in failure. Through thorough planning and the backing of his spirits, he had accomplished many missions. When he looked back, it seemed he had only gone for mackerel in waters with conspicuous whales and tuna. However, this was 1 December, only forty-eight hours had lapsed since he kidnapped Peza. It was too early for him to despair or lose hope.

He was going for the haul of his life. To that end, he had Peza in his custody, bait Binga wouldn't resist. The father would come for his son, and he, Bomani, would lay his hands on the beast and fling it into the air by the tail, to show it Bomani was the beast of the beasts, and then subdue it. He had to teach Binga submission before he could put him to good use. Circus personnel knew better; an animal was beaten and starved into submission. Some animals died in the process. Clever ones accepted that he who held the whip was master of life and death.

Binga was a predator, very dangerous and unpredictable, but Bomani wielded the whip. If Binga's machismo got the better of him, Bomani would hammer him with devastating blows to the eyes, to blind him with blood and swollenness. Concussive blows would follow, to rock and disorient him mentally. Then he would pound him with quick jabs to the temples. When he was down, Bomani would take one of two options, one prolife, the other death. In pursuance of the former, he would urinate all over Binga, to undo death. If the situation demanded the latter, he would stoop over

Binga, split open the fool's skull with an axe, and look at the colour of his unhinged brain.

Bomani was glad he was an avowed, childless bachelor. Nobody could bait him the way he had allured Binga, and subpoena him to his possible death. Foremost, he reminded himself he was a hangman on the loose. In his field, patience was both virtuoso and the catchword. A hangman's main attribute was patience, the ability to wait for the condemned and all the preliminary formalities to end, and then step forward with a priestly calmness for the kill.

Binga was a hangman too, but he, Bomani, was one making his way to the scaffold, the tools of his trade on his person. Binga was baited, a hangman to the slaughterer, or one to stand on the scaffold as a subordinate. One hangman had to stand tall and supreme. There was never a tale of two hangmen on one scaffold. One just had to bow to the other.

Though Binga was his waking thought, he had to rake his mind for his bearings. Where was he? The air was dank and still. He was in a soiled dark overall and lying on loose pebbles. A kerosene lamp on the floor lit a cavernous tunnel. Around the lamp lay five still figures. They were his men, all in soiled dark overalls, and the boy whose wrists and ankles they had bound together with one strip of thin wire rope drawing blood where it cut into his skin. The shackling forced him to lie in a foetal position on his side, his elbows between his knees, mouth agape. He snored quietly with fatigue.

Bomani appraised them. Having travelled between twenty to thirty kilometres from Sakis Mine, taking turns to drag and kick the boy into compliance, and disguised as *kamwinwi Gule Wamkulu* dancers to ward off suspicion, and accordingly dashing about after gagging the boy and hiding him in thickets when they came across people along the western forest's never ending footpaths, the group was leg-weary.

They were underground in a disused shaft about sixty metres deep. The climb down was arduous. He understood Sakis Mine was a

crime scene bustling with uniformed police officers and homicide detectives. That way he would practise extreme caution when he returned. He was a man of juju and a man of his word. One way or the other he would return. A man of juju had the world in his hands. He had told Binga's wife he would return. Even if the authorities deployed a brigade in and around the compound, he would return. A determined man didn't allow his eyes to see obstacles and snags, but accomplishments and achievements.

The shaft wasn't standard, something he knew already. He guessed Germans had mined in the area in the 1920s and 30s when they were amassing revenue to fund the Second World War. The old Germans brought machinery, mainly stamp and ball mills, and rivalled the British in extracting Rhodesian gold. Bomani could differentiate between old British and German mines. The British tunnelled from shafts every thirty metres. Their tunnels were wide, pillared and berthed. The Germans were infamous for their narrow shafts and tunnels in which African labourers toiled almost coiled up like foetuses. The Nazi fund-raisers minimised costs through overlooking safety and strict confinement to gold seams. Where shafts and tunnels in old Germanic mines were wide, it was because of broad seams. Therefore, the descent was long and perilous, but peril brought sparks in Bomani's life. They were in an underground tunnel of an old gold mine. Underground anyway was home to Bomani and his team.

Bomani looked at his sleeping men, men as loyal and virulent as goblins. The five men had taken oaths not to fail him, and none had ever failed him. He had heard of each one of them when they were loose and operating solo in different parts of the country, and he had gone to recruit them into his fold. In their individual capacities, they were beasts, but together they were a family, loyal to him and each other to the grave.

Where was Binga, a missing member of this unique family, an asset that could broaden significantly Bomani's investment portfolio?

Bomani viewed himself foremost as a businessperson. Acquisition of skilled and experienced workers, increasing market spheres and well-timed mergers and conglomerates swelled investments and garnered more revenue into the coffers. Did Binga understand it that way? Perhaps he was myopic and busied himself with subsistence.

As long as Binga was at large, Bomani's vision of the future remained obscure. The future version of the family also remained crippled and deprived. The record of this thug, mugger and murderer impressed him from the onset. Prowling alone like a lumbering hippopotamus was dangerous. With no one covering his back, Binga would be easy prey to a patient adversary. He just had to come into the fold and they'd protect one another's back, especially at the hit-and-run heist he planned for Zimbabwe's stockpile of diamonds.

Once he recruited Binga and gained his confidence, they would rob soldiers elsewhere of their fatigues and boots before pouncing on Marange Village in Chiadzwa at night. The team would set a few individuals on fire to show the depth of their brutality. Then they'd commandeer the whole village to one end of the vast diamond fields to detract security. When the state security personnel were busy shooting down the villagers and radioing for backup support, the family would attack the soldiers at the vault. With dynamite, they'd send the vault into the air, and use a tractor to uproot the safe from its moorings. Acetylene and oxygen gas bottles would do the rest of the work in the forest. Over three hundred thousand pieces of uncut industrial and domestic diamonds would be theirs. That was the plan in its basic form. Binga and he would develop and polish it. After the robbery, the family would break forthwith.

Bomani would get the lion's share and return to his roots in Chapola Village near Lake Malawi where he had a homestead to reclaim and revive. The *Gule Wamkulu* fraternity would celebrate his return. He would spend the rest of his life praising and worshipping *Gule Wamkulu* gods and spirits. With words, dances, millet beer and live animal sacrifices, which he would cast into the lake, he would

honour them. The still, deep waters of the lake harboured age-old spirits, the backbone of the minor spirits that roamed Malawi's villages and towns. He knew that though the spirits that resided in rivers and lakes were fastidious, once pleased, they favoured a man with longevity and power over the lives of fellow human beings.

He was en route to pleasing the spirits in Lake Malawi. The gods would reward him with profound power to curse to death anyone who dared cross his path. The power to hold the lives of others in one's hand was enviable. Hitler possessed and enjoyed it disguised as a massive armaments programme. Osama bin Laden basked in it veiled as his love for Allah, the Caliphate and the Holy Koran. The power to destroy, in the hands of educated orators, was almost understandable, but he knew it was in the same category as juju.

Already Bomani had five competent men, seasoned and experienced in street fighting, robbery, mugging and murder. Binga had to be within their ranks to complement their efforts, double or treble them. Bomani didn't want to admit to himself that Binga was worth more than the five men were, and if his archrival had the nerve, could swing the diamond heist alone.

Bomani reminisced on his last encounter with Binga four years ago. They met at dawn in the sparse forest to the east of the Chiadzwa diamond fields behind Gudyanga Communal Lands about twelve kilometres from Birchenough Bridge. Binga was returning from robbing illegal diamond diggers. Bomani and his team, then four men, lay in ambush to rob those returning from the fields. When Binga walked into the ambush, he stopped instinctively, it seemed, and looked in all directions. Bomani took it the prey had sniffed the ambush, and such sniffing wasn't a natural ability. He knew Binga was a man of juju and an interesting challenge, but that didn't deter Bomani and three of his men. They sprang from their hiding places and rushed at him. Binga stood his ground and fought his way out of the circle of death around him. The men had machetes and small

metallic axes, tomahawk-like, which they swung ruthlessly at him. He had an Okapi knife he used with masterly expertise.

Korean and Japanese martial arts skills coming in handy, he dodged the axes and moved in to rip open the men's midsections, shoulders and forearms. The manner he fought impressed Bomani. Binga's devastation lay in reaction. He feigned to attack or attacked as a reaction to his attackers' poorly timed and miscalculated strikes, or made movements to trick them into bringing their guard down. On finding an opening, he struck the sternum, the temples, the eyes and the groin.

He remembered Binga kicking him in the groin when he had raised his axe to split open his skull, and dropping to his knees in pain, drained of strength. The snap kick, swift as a cobra's offensive, and the subsequent pain, brought down his hands to nurse his stricken manhood. He was keeling helplessly when Binga sent him flying sideward with a kick below his left ear. Bomani fell and smelled blood in his nose, which immediately poured out like rivulets through his nostrils. He lay gasping in the dust and was glad his team was engaging Binga, or the man could've finished him off. However, his men were fighting a losing battle. Within moments, two of Bomani's men were dying on the ground, disembowelled. On struggling to his feet, Bomani discovered that his forearms were cut and bleeding profusely.

Sensing embarrassing and costly defeat, already two of his men were down and jerking, Bomani whistled and dived to the ground with the other man, leaving Binga standing. Though the last henchman dived to the ground together with his lord, Binga's blows to the eyes and jaws and wide swings of the Okapi left Bomani hobbling, dazed and bleeding in many places. Bomani knew that like the other two men jerking on the ground, the third man wasn't going to rise. With his men down, this was the perfect time for the gunman. It was then that the fourth men on the edge of an atoll about a hundred metres away opened fire at Binga with an AK 47 rifle. Binga

dropped to the ground and rolled into a nearby bush. From the look of it, Binga appeared hit before his body touched the ground.

The gunman was an excessive shooter. Spraying generous volleys, he shook the bush with bullets, dust rising around it, until his magazine was empty. Silence ensued. Bomani squinted and noticed that behind the bush nothing stirred, which convinced him Binga was hit, dying or dead. He wanted to be the first one to reach him and dispossess him of the diamonds he possibly carried. The gunner remained at his elevated vintage position on the atoll, probably reloading.

The sun was breaking from the eastern horizon, and the remnants of night were giving way to light, when Bomani found Binga lying behind the bush and covered in dust. He lay on his back, mouth ajar, eyes staring, but the Okapi was still in Binga's hand. What Bomani saw was a profound mugger par excellence who had lived by the knife and was meeting his death with the knife firmly in his hand. Had Bomani known Binga was a banded cobra feigning death, he wouldn't have stooped over him in an attempt to urinate all over him to dissuade death from claiming him.

Binga erupted into life, sweeping him to the ground, mounting and squatting on his chest, the tip of the Okapi placed against the foot of his larynx. Bomani held his breath, shaken to the core of his bones. Had he tried to speak or swallow saliva, movement of the larynx could've seen him fatally cut. Binga's face was inches from his, a precaution against the gunman. If Bomani's one-man precautionary defence opened fire, bullets would tear into the two men.

"I'll tell you some romantic words, woman." Binga said, grinning. "Surrender your night's takings. Tell your dogs to back off."

Bomani remained motionless and silent; his larynx had to be still.

"I can cut your throat and still get the diamonds, or you can simply hand them over. If I were in your shoes, I'd comply for me to live to lay another ambush, that's how a wise man invests in the future. It's like sending a child to school."

As Bomani fished the diamonds from his pockets, Binga slid down to free Bomani's hands. Rudely, he occupied himself with mock copulation with his rival when their crotches aligned and made gluttonous, libidinous sounds. Though it was seemingly moronic, Binga figuratively communicated his perception of him; that he saw him as a woman, the worst insult of Bomani's life.

"When asked what kind of a man Binga is, tell the enquirer he's very romantic."

The incident was ever vivid in him, souring his mind all the time. With the quarry gone, Bomani sat on the ground shaking with rage as his gunman dressed the wounds on his forearms with makeshift bandages from the clothing of the slain men. Three men lay dead in the botched ambush. The gunman and he painstakingly dragged the corpses to the crocodile infested banks of the Sabi River about a kilometre away. The injuries to his forearms and the loss of diamonds worth about three thousand dollars on the black market didn't worry him much. What did and perpetually humiliated him was the actuality Binga had mounted and banged him with coitus thrusts.

The defeat sent him back to the drawing board. He revisited his diviners and sorcerers and consulted his *Gule Wamkulu* and ancestral spirits. Now, four years later, he was stronger and death-defiant, thanks to the efforts of juju masters. For the new strength and the defiance, he parted with fistfuls of US dollars, but he had no regrets, this was a worthy investment. Binga had physically invested in himself; it appeared, but as a counter measure, Bomani had invested where it mattered most, in the spiritual realm.

The loss of men he had deemed surpassingly combative sent him on another recruiting spree in far-flung places for mugging brutes and murderers, the only people he could work with. Recruiting such men wasn't an easy task; they fought back dangerously. Bomani knew any person could handle any poisonous snake effortlessly if one held it firmly behind the neck. He was a beast charmer.

The recruitment was a strenuous task, which took him a year. First, he worked on rumours of possible brutes in mineral-rich areas. Then he would send a man to verify. If convinced of the existence and operation of such a brute in an area, he would descend on him with his mate, to subdue him physically until he was game to Bomani's wishes. The gunner on the day of the ambush was the only survivor from his team, which sent Bomani on a maelstrom of journeys in the country culminating in the team at his disposal. He was convinced juju and his ancestral spirits saw to it the men's allegiance to him was total and unwavering.

If Binga failed to present himself in the next few days, he would cut Peza to pieces and see to it the rogue's wife saw them, especially the head, to torment her for life. His men and he would depart for the heist at the Chiadzwa diamond fields in Manicaland. Bomani was confident *Gule Wamkulu* gods and spirits had already placed Binga in his hands. He had to be patient; the bait would do all the work.

After the copulative encounter, Binga vanished from the villages around the diamond fields where diggers normally saw him. Bomani understood that the natural-born fighter, for that was his immediate perception of the man thereafter, didn't reside in Chiadzwa or anywhere near the rural area. However, a month ago he learnt from an illegal diamond digger residing in Marange Village of a feared brute who lived and worked at a mine near the Empress turn-off along the Harare-Bulawayo highway. The informer was a teenager from the ghost town of Venice Mine about seven kilometres from Sakis Mine. Bomani solicited more information. Though the informer insisted the mugger's name was Akar Muja, the description and estimated age of the brute matched Binga.

Bomani had seen no need to despatch a man for reconnaissance. Within the month, he gathered all the information he needed, the name of the mine where Binga worked as a gold mill feeder, and a description of his wife and only child. The terrain around Sakis Mine and possible getaway routes from the mine posed no problem.

They'd kidnap Binga or the son, and cross the western forest to the largest and oldest graveyard in the farming and mining area. Whoever tried to foil their mission at Sakis Mine would suffer severely.

The group travelled by bus over four hundred and fifty kilometres from Chiadzwa to subdue a beast and initiate it into their ranks. The event was supposed to be characterised by ritualistic pomp and fanfare, for those gifted with spiritual sight. On the day, angels and gods from his spiritual realm were supposed to come down and bless the proceedings. If everything had gone well, there would've been a solar eclipse as confirmation of the pleasure and satisfaction of the rulers from the other world. He had no delusions about it.

Bomani picked a pebble and threw it at the back of the gunman. He woke with a start, fumbled around him and picked the AK 47. Bomani gestured to the gunman to eat and go up. His bones told him after hibernating for over forty-eight hours it was time to be on the move. Through the medium of his bones, spirits communicated with him. The gunman opened a trunk on the deeper and unlit side of the tunnel and helped himself to a handful of loose biscuits and strips of biltong. He switched on a small battery torch, slung the rifle at his back and trudged towards the shaft. Bomani could see the shaft and the end of the wire rope in the beam of his torch.

The ascent would cost the man about fifteen minutes. They'd give him half an hour to scan the surface and go round the shaft to ascertain their safety before he cast a stone down the shaft, a signal all was well. Only then, would they go up and breathe fresh air again. If there was trouble or he suspected an ambush, from the police or any other source, he would cast a handful of stones at once. The team would've to find another exit out of the mine, usually through a breather or other shafts, which they had to locate. If none existed, they'd hibernate for days on end until Bomani's bones convinced him to send another man up.

Chapter 32

Evans Emedhi bought a small packet of oranges and apples in a supermarket in Kadoma, and walked across the small town to the government hospital. This day, 1 December, was a great day in his life. For the first time he was acting on behalf of the mill manager. Emedhi walked to Kadoma General Hospital through Cameron Square full of dilapidated, unregistered taxis, scantily dressed women staring at men, cigarette-smoking street children and pathetic beggars; some blind, some deaf, some faking both.

He started towards the Civic Centre where the District Administrator, the townhouse housing the mayor's office and the magistrate's court building stood. Cellular airtime vendors stood in clusters at every corner. The once-white walls of the once elegant townhouse and court buildings were discoloured and cracked. Grass grew on the lawn and its central pond was dysfunctional and overgrown. Emedhi was nostalgic of the red and golden fish he used to see in the pond. The fish, swimming in patterns and jutting at the sight of people, used to attract all sorts of onlookers from adults to children of every race.

The hospital, a sprawling non-storey affair in a sorry state dissolutely appealing for a facelift, appeared ahead. Running water had long ceased to exist at the referral centre, exhorting a non-governmental organisation to sink a hand-operated borehole near the foyer. The gutters were broken and sagging, in some places missing. The walls cried for filling and repainting. Windowpanes were missing, cracked or broken.

A few minutes before the start of the morning visiting period, he entered the foyer full of ailing people standing in long queues and littered with vomit and blood-stained wheelchairs, some broken. After making an inquiry at the reception, he exited the other end

onto a labyrinth of roofed passages linking various wards and support buildings except the mortuary, a solitary building emitting a foul smell. He thought the only justice to the buildings would be to raze them down and pave way for a modern state-of-the art highly computerised hospital. The town needed a better hospital, not this complex that could be mistaken for an African missionary boarding school. The institute's two boilers, centrally located in a shed, were in pieces, the inside of the mounted core structures rusty, worn out and revealing missing bricks and broken grate chains.

When he came to the Burns Unit as directed by the receptionist, through a Judas window in a door, he saw three nurses in rubber gloves and surgical masks scrubbing Remegio's wounds raw near a multi-panelled red-hot electric heater. The teenager was in untold agony, shedding tears and shuddering. His face and entire body seemed a festering blister. Deaf to his plight for relief and oblivious of his nudity, the nurses scrubbed him until the wounds were pinkish as he sat in a special stainless steel chair. Then they applied an ointment on him and covered him in gaze-like bandages as though they were about to cast his entire body in plaster. Throughout the procedure, Remegio writhed, grimaced and winced.

Goose pimples invaded Emedhi's skin. The urge to turn back, return to Sakis Mine and ask Mr Keneas to assign someone nearly gained the better of him. Emedhi entered the cubicle on manly grounds, but essentially driven by the hope for a promotion or a hike in his paltry wages. Remegio didn't recognise him, wincing and grimacing appeared his preoccupation.

"You must leave in the shortest time possible," a nurse pleaded with Emedhi. "The patient is susceptible to extraneous bacterial infection."

Placing the oranges on a table near Remegio, Emedhi bent and peered into the former's eyes, now dark as pools of writing ink, and reptilian. He called, "*Madzibaba* Remegio, *Madzibaba* Remegio... Remegio. I'm Emedhi, Mr Emedhi, from the mine... Sakis." He read

no recognition in the teenager's eyes. "Mr Keneas asked me to visit you and to give you this," he pointed at the packet of oranges and apples. Remegio acknowledged neither his presence nor the fruits. The facial bandage was a white mask. Emedhi turned to the nurses. "Can't he hear me?"

The nurses shook their heads. "Please leave immediately," the nurse who asked him to leave said firmly.

Emedhi walked out with his head bowed, his eyes teary, wishing Remegio's father and stepmother would lay aside their differences and visit him. The Chipendos had vowed not to visit him, blaming everything on the apostolic faith and Jatropa said to be running naked in the forest. The teenager's father said he would rather visit Jatropa in the bush and thank him for his heavenly guardianship over his son. Emedhi thought parental love and assurance could see the teenager through the valley of death.

Outside, at a nurses' desk along a corridor, Emedhi enquired from a solitary middle-aged nurse, "What're Remegio's chances of survival?"

"Our job is to assure all medical cases of survival and to give hope," the nurse said. "We do so even when death is imminent."

Head bowed, Emedhi walked out of the hospital.

Chapter 33

With incense pervading the cathedral air as the priest in his fascinating robes conducted Requiem Mass for Jackson Mpaya Gadaga in Chitungwiza's St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral, 1 December began to prove a day for reflection and religious meditation for Binga Jochoma. Mourners sat on every pew in the transepts and cathedral's main auditorium. On the altar, the silver and gold Eucharistic appointments stood solemn and spellbinding. To Binga the chalice seemed the main attraction of the appointments, large, enthralling, and centrally placed among the numerous intriguing items.

Minutes ago, the priest raised it thrice and blessed the wine in it in a voice that reminded him of Bomani Kumanda, the Chiadzwa beast that never accepted defeat, and brought a cold shiver in him. As the priest mentioned something to the effect that the wine was the fruit of the vine and the work of human hands, Binga understood he had blundered by letting Bomani live. He should've killed him four years ago when he had the chance, but out of vanity, he sought to humiliate him with copulation. By then he hadn't known much about the brute until the early morning ambush. Only after he had survived and slain men, did he understand who and what he had fought.

When he confided to gold panning acquaintances that he had nearly lost his diamonds and life to armed thugs behind Gudyanga Village, they had shaken their heads in disbelief. When he furnished them with a description of the men whose ambush he had thwarted, the listeners held their breath and stared at him in awe. From his audience he learnt the names Bomani Kumanda and that he was the Beast of Chiadzwa. Very few men had survived his attacks. Those whom Bomani failed to subdue, he pursued to the ends of the earth until he broke their bones or took their lives. They assured him the evil one would come for him.

Binga reminded himself he was in church and had to follow the requiem proceedings. Chiadzwa was very far from Sakis Mine and Chitungwiza, and it was likely offensive to God for one to sit in His holy presence, smell the incense and yet be fearful of evil. Was he a lesser evil?

The question caught him off guard. He was reasonably evil; he maimed or killed for the survival of his family and the women in his life. The people he attacked were pagans of no use, benefit or value to God. Illegal gold diggers lived on alcohol, marijuana and unprotected sex. When intoxicated, they blasphemed against God by giving praise to their ancestral spirits for the gold nuggets they extracted from the earth. These idiots, whose reckless whores littered the streets with used condoms, damaged the environment with their unplanned digging, contributed nothing to the economy and were a perceivable nuisance to the government and God. Destined for perdition, to Hell, he was despatching them one by one.

Sitting in the cathedral among the faithful, Binga felt he was one with the congregants; God didn't discriminate and loved sinners. Actually, in the final analysis, he was more of a tool in the hands of God than anything else. God wasn't going to judge him harshly. Could God afford to be averse to a man who allowed his wife to go to church and bought her all the materials for her religious garments?

The army, that world of corporal punishment, patriotic concepts and values, had wrongly ingrained in him the doctrine of hankering after courage, comradeship, honour and loyalty, a veiled attempt to deceive him into accepting that the defence, the love of one's country and the sovereignty of one's nation came first above all things including his life, family and parents. The brainwashing was wrong and condemnable. A man's life, family and parents came first in equal measure. If need be, a drowning man stepped on the heads of others to keep his head above water.

As he sat in the cathedral and pondered his life and God's compassion for His children, every man, woman and child under the

sun, he saw that many families in the country were shamefacedly NGO-dependent in an independent country. In the rural areas, households received a wide array of items from basic foodstuffs and sanitary pads to weeding hoes. Non-governmental organisations were building Blair toilets in backward schools, re-stocking their libraries, handing textbooks to pupils and massively campaigning against cholera. In urban areas, one organisation was sinking boreholes to alleviate the chronic shortage of municipal water. The convergence of a plethora of NGOs in the country was indisputable evidence the government had failed to deliver and the country was a fragile failed state. The government had relegated the care of its vulnerable populace to foreigners.

Binga didn't believe in failure; it had never been an option in his life. He was a staunch believer in survival. Someday he would make a meteoric rise from his ashes like the phoenix. Satellite television news often carried reports on people lost at sea in yachts and tugs who turned to cannibalism. In Zimbabwe, the unforgiving economy blighted by joblessness and feuding polarised political parties rendered crime a survival procedure.

Large candles in formation burned on tall holders. In a new black, English three-piece suit, a white Van Hussein shirt and dark shades, Binga was dressed for the occasion. As he listened to hymns and prayers, he knew he was the man of the year to Gillian's family and relatives; he had purchased the casket and hired the ultramodern Mercedes Benz hearse that ferried the body from the mortuary at Chitungwiza General Hospital. He had also hired four thirty-six-seat commuter omnibuses to transport mourners from the family's house to the St Mary's Cathedral and subsequently to the graveyard after the Mass.

Gillian clung to his arm, sobbing into his shoulder as they sat in the front pew with her parents and close relatives. A few metres away stood the casket on a wheeled, foldable, shiny, steel stand. The imposing, trapezoidal coffin was white and decorated with polished

golden handles endowed with intricate curlicues. Chrysanthemums and marigolds stood on the casket and around the steel stand. Beyond the casket were the pulpit and the laden altar, the priest and his four seated servers solemn in surplices.

Staring at the coffin with the priest in the backdrop, Binga thought of the thrill of killing, of taking another person's life and stealing from God. Did people understand that killing demanded a high degree of self-mastery as in Japanese archery? People in the developed world understood it, he believed; hence their fascination with serial murderers, which stemmed from their informed understanding of the sophistication of the mind of a murderer. A learned society marvelled at the gusto of a man facing numerous counts of murder, usually accompanied by rape and torture. A serial killer on the gallows in America, France or Britain was a tourist attraction. The views, drawings and final words of a condemned man were sellable material. In retrospect, he saw that it was the army and life's sophisticated schema of good and evil that had moulded and hardened him into what he was.

The priest went around the casket swinging an incense urn. The congregants and mourners broke into a song that pleaded for a closer proximity with God:

Ndinoda kugara padyo penyu, Mwari.

(I wish to stay close to you, God)

The song dragged. As the people sang, the priest pleaded with God to discount Brother Jackson Mpaya Gadaga's every sin of omission and commission, the sins he committed with members of his body and the transgressions arising from the thoughts of his mind. Looking around, Binga couldn't help thinking they were slanderers and adulterers in the cathedral. Why did believers make a great fuss about killing as though God regarded some sins as more

hideous than others? Petty thieving, lies, bearing false witness, staring at the fundamentals and cleavages of women, rape and murder... all soiled the Creator equally. Matipa told him Moses was a murderer, so were Joshua, David and other prominent Jewish figures, but all were highly favoured by God. By bolting and latching the door of the Ark, Noah committed genocide.

He reflected on the dead man. On their second date, two weeks after he first saw her on the First Street thoroughfare, when they were dining at the Da Eros Trattoria Italian Pizza Restaurant in Belgravia, a serene neighbourhood a few metres from the Embassy of South Africa, Gillian told him about Uncle Jackson. They were dining on the fifteen-dollars-a-plate *grigliata mista di pesce*, mixed fish grill with prawns, calamari, hake with splashes of garlic and tartar sauce.

Jackson was young brother to Gillian's father. Gillian's family and Jackson were Catholics. Before inflation skyrocketed and chased people from their jobs, he was a respectable mail carrier in the high-density suburb of Tafara. Then he lived by buying and reselling groceries, mainly cooking oil and sugar, commodities hard to come by at the height of the political chaos in the country. His business, though on a small scale, had thrived because his sources were reliable and his prices were flexible. Most of his neighbours became his customers, including one Mrs Karota, a thirty-five year old widow with six children, believed to moonlight as a waitress and a prostitute at a city centre hotel. Among her children was Cynthia, a thirteen-year old Form 2 school dropout.

Mrs Karota accrued such a sizeable debt from the groceries Jackson gave her on credit, until the amount was so huge that she devised a plan to silence him. One afternoon, two uniformed police officers came to arrest him on suspicions of raping a minor. When he asked who the minor was, they said it was Cynthia. He told them the whole thing was insane and absurd, but they asked him to accompany them to Tafara Police station to assist them with investigations,

assuring him they'd release him after obtaining his warned-and-cautioned statement.

That was the beginning of his woes. He never returned, not until two years later when he was terminally ill. Jackson and his people were too poor to afford a criminal lawyer. During trial, he entered a plea of not guilty. It didn't help. Gillian's family supposed the unscrupulous mother went on to coach her daughter into nailing him in court.

The charge was that at forty-two, Jackson was a childless bachelor who befriended a minor and raped her on numerous occasions. He maintained the minor visited him in his lodgings frequently, often to collect groceries and occasionally to tidy the house and wash dishes, but he never touched her. She was a friend he adored and she was probably obsessed with him, judging from the frequency of her visits and the small gifts of sweets she brought him. Gillian's uncle agreed with the prosecution it was a perilous relationship, but he denied it was sexual or improper in any manner.

When doctors examined the girl, they found her ravaged and suffering from gonorrhoea and syphilis. The court believed the word of a minor, especially one that cried emotionally in her evidence-in-chief. The magistrate, after a lengthy trial, took it Jackson was remorseless and had wasted the court's time, and sentenced him to ten years in prison with hard labour. Sentencing him, the magistrate described him as a social miscreant with the integrity of a dog, and initially sentenced him to more than thirty years in jail, but was lenient enough to let some of the terms run concurrently.

Poverty prohibited him from appealing to the High Court against sentence and conviction. Prison life in Zimbabwe was subhuman and torturous. A few months into his sentence, he developed a benign cough and a headache. His health deteriorated. The cough became stubborn, violent and continuous. A prison doctor diagnosed him with tuberculosis of the lungs and glands. Prison wardens assured relatives who visited him weekly the wasted man was receiving

treatment and would mend. Uncle Jackson didn't mend. Because of poor health, the prison discharged him after two years, but it was a known fact that prisons discharged on medical grounds only inmates whose illnesses and malignancies they found too advanced and would certainly cause death. The man died at his brother's house in Chitungwiza only a week after his discharge, Binga learnt.

Afterwards, viewers filed past the casket. When their turn came, Binga held sobbing Gillian and looked down into the casket. The corpse's eyes, temples and cheeks were sunken. The lips had the colour of raw spleen. The body before him was corroboration inmates died from overcrowding, hunger and numerous diseases including pellagra. The nation knew that the Red Cross and other non-governmental relief agencies supplied food and medicines to prisons throughout the country, glaring affirmation the Department of Correctional and Rehabilitation services was on its knees.

However, looking at the corpse, Binga concluded that neither prison life nor natural causes killed the man, but a poor woman. Fathoming it, the woman's quest for survival killed the man. Still, when he looked beyond the quest, he absolved the woman. An unforgiving economy was the culprit.

Chapter 34

Whenever Bomani Kumanda idled, he recalled his boyhood and family in painful detail. As he waited for the gunman to cast the signal, he reflected on the way he grew up in rural Malawi, and the stubborn curse that shattered his family and altered his perception of God. The thought of his late father who delved in *gule* for many years without the family knowing soured him. How could anyone in the family have known when the secrecy-shrouded association met in graveyards only to return to the people in monstrous masks and covered in feathers and ochre?

In rural Salima District, between the districts of Nkhotakota to the north and Mangochi to the south, and on a small plain about the size of six football fields on the largely rugged western shore of vast Lake Malawi, between the small fishing towns of Senga Bay and Chipoka, lay Chapola Village.

In the bleak village by the shore of the lake lay his roots where *Gule Wamkulu*, or simply *gule*, was a feared religion. Men who professed it were deadly gods. Malawi was the undisputed home of *Gule Wamkulu*, and Chapola Village was the metaphor of the ancestral practice. The feared dancers strictly danced during the coronation of a chief, at funerals or at memorial services. Their training camps were traditionally in the graveyards always out of bounds to the public until the camp adjoined. As long as *Gule Wamkulu* dancers and elders were in a graveyard, no burial took place. All practitioners of *gule*, from the women who sang for the dancers and clandestinely entertained them sexually, to the shirtless men who thundered the drums, were witches and wizards. Very few people knew they indulged in sexual orgies that were part of their endless rituals.

How his father joined the cult, Bomani had no idea, but the regrettable development happened when Bomani was in Form 1 at a local school. Perhaps his mother, Cheruna, had known, but his sister

and he suspected it because of his absence from home, which coincided with the *gule* camps in the local graveyard. No one had the nerve to go and find out; if discovered, the cultists forced the inquisitive person into the cult or, if they resisted, the village chief expelled the culprit and his family from the village. *Gule* elders would curse the unfortunate family to live in abject poverty, illness, childlessness, dejection and perpetual sorrow in all the four cardinal points.

Recruitment into the cult was by abduction, or rarely by freewill when one went to the graveyard ignoring the danger warning red cloths around the occupied cemeteries, and walked into their camps. Abducted individuals who showed profound unwillingness despite physical torture and threats of death paid substantial fines in the form of money, goats or cattle, or risked detention in the camps. *Gule* elders beat and cut incisions in their bodies, which they stuffed with ground bones of dead people mixed with juju. Such people never prospered in life and died shortly thereafter.

Aspiring candidates went through many rituals. Ultimately, one by one, all cult members would be intimate with the aspirant's wife for the maintenance of secrecy. The aspirant would sleep with the cult members' wives too. If the elders raped Bomani's mother that way, she never revealed it to him and his sister, Benita. However, when they suspected that their father had joined *gule*, Cheruna had grown thinner, sad-faced and suicidal. Thrice they had had to stop her from hanging herself. She never explained why she wanted to take her life. One day Bomani noticed a large bloat of blood on the seat of her dress. Benita, four years his senior, saw it too and ran to cover her with a waist-wrapping cloth. Mom was bleeding.

Benita had just completed Ordinary level and attained average passes in Food & Nutrition, Biology and Chewa, a vernacular. The rest of the subjects on her certificate had 'U's against them. She said her destiny was on the catwalks and in the hotels of Paris, which infuriated their father. He took a stick, cornered her in the cooking

hut and thrashed her until she was semi-naked. Had it not been for their mother who ran to rescue her, Cholooka could've killed her. Their father interchanged modelling with prostitution.

Benita was tall, flamingo-necked and bony. When she walked, sat or rose, her bones cracked. Growing up, Bomani feared a strong whirlwind would haul her into the air and cast her into Lake Malawi. Though by appearance Benita was a weakling, she was strong and could endure many hours of weeding under a tropical sun. Her hands were calloused and her feet chipped. For her destiny in France, she had already started making preparations by doing piece works in local shops and weeding the neighbours' maize and cotton fields for a fee, accruing money for the acquisition of a passport.

At twelve years old, he thought it normal for a woman of about forty-two to experience menstruation, but two weeks later, he noticed his mother was still bleeding. A goatskin Cheruna sat on betrayed her. One night about six months later, she fled from the homestead. His father hadn't panicked. He told the family and the neighbours she would return if she loved herself. Days later, they learned she was running amok in the surrounding villages, sleeping in goat pens and eating raw maize cobs and cassava.

Cholooka maintained she would return and busied himself with subsistence farming. Benita and he vainly accosted their father to find her and bring her home, but Cholooka said the matter was in the hands of God, and assured them she would return and he couldn't bear her absence. Cholooka called Bomani aside and told him a man wasn't supposed to be sentimental. That day Bomani learnt that when his father was eating, walking or ploughing with the oxen, his mind was in turmoil and with his wife.

Cheruna's relatives from Dowa caught and brought her home thirteen days later. Her clothes were torn and she was in all sorts of dirt including caking faeces. She was still bleeding, and her eyes were white and sunken from malnutrition and a clear shortage of blood.

Neighbours gathered around the homestead, stupefied women clasping their bosoms.

She stood in the open courtyard and pointed an accusing finger at her husband standing framed in the doorway of their sleeping hut, his countenance indifferent. “Cholooka is a wizard!” she shouted. “He licks my menstrual blood!”

The onlookers and her brothers gasped.

His father looked at her calmly and asked her handlers to bring her to him, claiming sickness was playing havoc with her mind, but Cholooka was a very unpredictable character. He shot from the sleeping hut brandishing a spear and chased the onlookers away. From that day, the wrapper around her waist covering her skirt became a sign she was ever bleeding. *Gule Wamkulu* was ruining her life. Benita couldn’t bear the sight of her mother dying before her eyes. She asked for permission to live with a distant female relative in Lilongwe and find work in the city. Cholooka gave the nod, but warned her from promiscuity and the vices of urban life. Benita gave her word she wouldn’t disgrace the family. Within the week, she packed her clothes and left the village. Only after she was gone did Bomani realise his emotional attachment to her.

At the end of one and a half years, a black Dodge Nitro van drove into the village. The all-terrain glossy vehicle and a caravan with tinted windows in tow drew admiring villagers out of their homesteads, children and adults alike. It moved slowly, meandering on the village’s storm-damaged dirt road gullied on both sides and threatened by dongas. Due to the van’s slow speed, the villagers had a good look at the vehicle, a rarity even in towns and cities, and saw a slender young woman seemingly plucked from a modelling magazine sitting behind the steering wheel. None of the villagers recognised Benita who had laboured for a pittance in their maize and cotton fields.

When she alighted from the vehicle, Bomani looked at her stupefied. Something restrained him from running and embracing

her. When he glanced at his parents, he saw that they were equally bewildered. Benita had the appearance and bearing more of an expensive whore than an aspiring model. She carried a crocodile-skin handbag. In the crook of her arm, she held onto a wealthy elderly white man about three times her age. The man was cumbersome. What was she doing with this barrel of a man in a T-shirt, a pair of cargo long-shorts and sneakers? African culture forbade lovers to travel alone. No, she wasn't in love with this bearded baobab stump, but his wallet. The two were obviously intimate; the caravan and the absence of a trusted escort suggested so. Who had given his sister in marriage to this man?

Bomani appraised her with envy and disgust. Her skin was porcelain-smooth, her hair long, curly and cascading to her shoulder blades. Her nails were manicured and extraordinarily long. Her palms weren't calloused anymore, but felt as soft as wool when she shook his hand. She wore a necklace glistening with diamonds and an engagement ring endowed with a large sapphire stone.

Bomani and his parents welcomed the two into the sitting hut. For the first time, Bomani saw that his father was nervous, and felt pity for him. Choolooka couldn't speak English and was afraid of white men, Malawi's former colonial masters and captains of industry. A white man was *bwana*, lord. Bomani feared their father would suddenly rise and polish the white man's shoes with his handkerchief.

Benita was eighteen and unafraid of the foreigner with protuberant, dark eyes. The old man, obese and unsightly in large spectacles with thick lenses, spoke neither English nor Chewa. Sitting close to him on the earthen bench moored into the wall, shamefacedly she greeted the family. The man never stopped taking bottled water and wiping sweat beads from his brow.

"This is my fiancé", she said. "He's a businessman born in a city called Bishkek in a country now called Kyrgyzstan. He was educated in Astana in a country now called Kazakhstan. In Astana are the

headquarters of his international business ventures.” From her handbag, she drew bankcards and handed them to Bomani.

He looked at the cards one by one: Standard Chartered Bank, Malawi; Stanbic Bank, Zimbabwe; Banco Internacional de Moçambique; First Bank of Nigeria; and Banque Internationale Arabe de Tunisie. All the cards bore an imprint of her name. Nobody knew what to say.

She hastened to add the mogul had shares in OPEC, the international oil cartel. He also had a stake in the Kazakhstan-based minerals group ENRC, Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation, and was a friend of the Russian luminaries Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev.

Nodding his head in acknowledgement the mogul was a man with delicious cakes baking in innumerable ovens overseas, Cholooka finally found his tongue and had the nerve to ask, “What language does the foreigner speak?”

“Russian and Kyrgyz,” Benita told the gathered family. “He’s into gold, platinum and colliery mining. He’s also into real estate and large-scale landscaping. He’s business interests in New York, Moscow, Berlin and Tokyo. Now, he’s establishing ties with our government. He wants to construct a multi-storied office block in Lilongwe to manage and oversee the multi-million dollar ventures he intends to launch in the region.”

The family just nodded.

“How do you converse with *bwana*?” Cholooka interrupted her.

“We left his Kyrgyzstani personal secretary and translator at his villa in Lilongwe,” she answered. “She’s conversant in English, French and Spanish.”

The tycoon’s name, Tukhachevsky Mokolajczyk, was a tongue twister. The silver-haired man frowned and corrected her angrily each time she mentioned it. Bomani, fourteen at the time and in Form 3, never grasped the man’s name. Benita and the man used signs and drawings to speak.

Cholooka was keen to know how she met the foreigner, and if a wealthy man with white hair and a beard longer than an Imam's could be single.

Benita smiled shyly. "I met him by some streak of luck."

She told them she went to register with an employment agency for domestic workers in Lilongwe. The Kyrgyzstani happened to be in the office with his secretary-cum-translator. The tycoon was looking for house cleaners for a villa he had just bought in the city. Being a fastidious man who didn't compromise on quality, he had come to handpick four workers. Scores of women turned up for the selection. She was his first choice; the other three were middle-aged women with neither curriculum vitae nor traceable references.

The look on Cholooka's face was that of disapproval. Foremost the suitor was older than Cholooka and the couple wasn't courting according to custom. It was clear the two had been long intimate and had created a decadent world of values different from their own. The family knew stress and anger had dire consequences on epileptic Cholooka. When extremely disappointed, seizures took him. Reluctantly their father had approved.

Benita took the foreigner's hand and led him outside the hut. From the vehicle, they off-loaded large cardboard boxes packed with groceries, mineral drinks and clothing. For the first time in years, Bomani had heard his mother ululating in jubilee and hopping on the same spot despite her failing health, but Cholooka sat with his head bowed in a fusion of embarrassment, humility and fear of the white man.

Later that day, the white man stared at Cheruna, seemingly lustfully, unsettling Cholooka. The suitor scribbled an encircled cross on the ground and pointed at the drawing and at Cheruna. Benita told them her fiancé was suggesting they took their mother to hospital. Cholooka was infuriated. He protested strongly and told Benita to tell the foreigner that he, Cholooka, was the head of the family and Malawians didn't tolerate suitors who poked their noses

into private matters. No one raised the issue again. Bomani failed to see the logic behind his father's anger and protest, but had a hint his father had a hand in his mother's illness.

The foreigner was sullen most of the time, however, when Benita rose to do the chores, he fixed his eyes on her fundament and a smile crossed his face. He declined the roasted breams and cooked pounded cassava ailing Cheruna prepared them, gesturing his stomach couldn't hold local dishes. In vulgar gestures, he made her know he could suffer from diarrhoea if he forced himself. The visitor only took bottled water, tinned food and biltong they brought in the caravan.

When night fell and everyone was retiring to bed, Benita waved at the Kyrgyzstani, left the sitting hut and headed to her sleeping hut, but her fiancé followed her there and dragged her to the caravan, fondling her breasts and slapping her buttocks. Bomani and his parents had to look away. The two locked themselves in the caravan.

Before Bomani blew the paraffin lamp in his hut, a continuous squeaking sound captured his attention. He peered outside through a crack in the door and saw the caravan rocking gently. The Kyrgyzstani was laughing in bouts and grunting. Bomani tried to sleep, deliberately setting his mind on other things apart from his sister and the wealthy goof she brought to the village, but the pervasive noise disturbed and offended him. He blew the light and lay in the blankets, his head covered, fermenting with shame and embarrassment. The noises penetrated the blankets.

Wondering if his parents could hear the noises and what they thought of them, sleep eventually whisked him away. However, the same noises woke him during the night. Again, he peered outside and saw the caravan, now moonlit, rocking violently this time, and heard the white man bellowing like a jockey urging a tiring horse towards the finishing line. The temptation to rise and knock at the caravan door seized him, but on second thoughts, he restrained himself.

For the first time in his life, Bomani took a long walk in the night, dogs barking at him, and wandered through Chapola's string of homesteads, his mind in a whirlwind of confusion. Was the couple's affair a blessing or a curse to the family? What had driven his sister into an affair with the alien? He refused to accept abject poverty was the culprit. Was it on the strength of the engagement ring, that sapphire stone, that the mogul had attained conjugal rights over his sister? By walking away, was he not proving to himself that he was a coward scared of facing a shameless foreigner?

Towards dawn, he headed home, tired and sleepy. Darkness was waning when he found the caravan still and silent. No one was about. Tired and sleepy, he entered his hut and lay in the blankets. His parents had obviously heard the noises. How would he look them in the face and pretend the night was without incident?

He was about to fall asleep when the noises came again, and he felt like torching the caravan. Just then, he heard the door to his parents hut open violently. He peered outside and saw his father, shirtless and brandishing his spear. Cholooka stormed out and trotted to the squeaking caravan. Bomani had never seen his father so enraged. Beside himself with irrepressible shudders, Cholooka banged a clenched fist on the caravan door and retreated about five paces for room to strike. Bomani knew his father, who wielded the spear only when he was extremely furious, was beyond calming. Bomani willed his father to strike dead the foreigner.

The caravan stopped rocking and the door swung open. The Kyrgyzstani dwarfed the small doorway in nothing but a towel around his midsection. The white man was sweating profusely and inhaling from an anti-asthma canister.

Cholooka threw the spear. Bomani closed his eyes; he didn't want to see the gore. The sound of something breaking as the spear made impact followed immediately. Bomani took it as the sound of a breaking ribcage, probably the sternum. In a flash Bomani's mind raced. Shortly, the homestead would teem with police officers, and

every villager in the area would converge at the residence to see the body of a white man covered by a blanket and lying beside a caravan, the shaft of a spear protruding from the blanket. Bomani saw an executioner hanging his father. When he heard neither a scream of agony nor the thud of a falling body, he opened his eyes.

There, in the doorway the foreigner stood, petrified, the spearhead embedded in the doorframe at a height level with the man's chest. Cholooka pulled the spear out and walked away without making a gesture or uttering a word. He had warned the white man. Before he reached his hut, epileptic fits seized him. He fell to the ground and started to jerk, frothing and hissing.

Bomani ran to his father, so did his mother who issued from the parental sleeping hut, both pointing and cursing at Cholooka. It was common knowledge epilepsy was a demonic affliction, and the vilest epithets shamed and drove it away. Gradually the seizures ceased and he was close to himself again after about an hour.

Before the sun broke from the eastern mountains, the Dodge Nitro growled out of the village, Benita in the caravan, which she never left since the incident, the Kyrgyzstani on the steering wheel. The vehicle and the caravan vanished into a gorge and was heard roaring away behind the western mountains. The family never saw Benita and her tycoon again.

A year later, Benita wrote them a letter of apology from a hotel in Paris. She was sorry for the dishonour she brought to the family, which she described as a necessary means to an objective. She was now a part-time model for Gucci and Dior, and plying her trade in Paris but frequented London, New York and Moscow's catwalks. Three months after her arrival in France, she wrote, she featured on the cover of *Vogue* magazine. The letter came with a number of her photographs in stiletto shoes, bikinis, ridiculous mini-skirts and revealing see-through dresses. She stood on beaches, on the Rue Sufflot pavement near the famed Pantheon, on a bathing barge on the Seine, on the bonnet of a Peugeot, near the Eiffel Tower, by the

entrance of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and at various locations astride horses and motorbikes.

By looking at the pictures, Bomani saw the semi-nakedness of his sister, now a perceivable sexual object in the hands of exploitative perverts. He didn't envy her, and he pitied African emigrants in the Diaspora.

About the Kyrgyzstani, she wrote he was arrested on landing in Paris on suspicions of being an Al Qaeda high-ranking official. She stated the FBI and Britain's CIA wanted him in connection with either facilitating or handling the logistical aspects of many bloody terrorist assaults. The terrorist wasn't Tukhachevsky Mokolajczyk, as he and his particulars had purported, but a supposed Shiite Islamic cleric from Iraq masquerading as a businessperson from Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan. The man wasn't old, but dyed his beard and hair white and wore fake spectacles as a disguise. He was only forty-six years old.

The letter stated the Al Qaeda was targeting poor countries with unsophisticated intelligence systems for the recruitment of suicide attackers of distinct African descent with better chances of penetrating America without much suspicion. In conclusion, she wrote that while she was thankful the suspected terrorist was her springboard to the life of her dreams, she berated him for stealing her youth, which no amount could recompense. For the disgrace and the dishonour she brought the family, she had already sent them ten thousand US dollars by money transfer, which they had to claim from a bureau de change in Lilongwe.

The amount transformed the family. In a fortnight a four-bedroom brick house replaced the homestead's cluster of four huts save for the cooking hut and a detached granary standing on rock boulders. Though humble by western standards, the house had the status of a palace in the village. The purchase of twenty Brahman heifers and five bulls of the same breed bolstered their herd of two oxen and a cow. However, that didn't exhaust the ten thousand

dollars. Cholooka went on to buy an eight-five horsepower second-hand Massey Fergusson tractor from a dealer in Nkhotakota near Lake Malawi. The seller delivered the tractor complete with a disc plough, a harrow, planter and a cultivator. His father quickly learnt how to drive and use it in their maize and cotton fields.

From the day of the receipt of the money, Benita's name never left Cholooka's tongue. He lied she was a nurse at an elite hospital in Paris. He lacked kind words for those who enquired after the obese white man she brought to the village. Such people agitated his wrath. He told them off, or, when he elected to be very arrogant, that the foreigner was nothing more than his daughter's chef and chauffer when she was in Lilongwe.

In the meantime, Cheruna's health continued to plummet. Cholooka didn't spend any penny on her health. She spent days lying on a reed mat in the sun, her body as flat and wasted as a crepe. At night, Bomani heard her groaning and grunting in pain, and his father snoring. Several times, he noticed large blotches of light blood on the wrapper around her waist. Her eyes became whiter, her palms paler than before. When she began to refrain from looking anyone in the face and glassy green flies became her companions, he sensed his mother was dying. The flies perched on the lids of her unblinking eyes and on her patched lips. Daring ones flew in and out of her mouth, but Cheruna endured the illness like a proverbial cat.

Bomani feared his father would tire from nursing and carrying her in and out of the house like a parcel, and strangle her during the night, or deliberately feed her with poisonous mushrooms. He never did, though he was ostensibly mechanical in his care giving.

When Bomani received his Ordinary results four months after the transformation, he had distinctions in all the subjects employers deemed essential, and decided not to embark on Advanced Level studies but to find work as a matter of urgency for the sake of his ailing mother, a decision his father opposed. Cholooka argued things were looking up; the rains were good and they expected a bumper

harvest, and there was extra money brought in from ploughing the fields of other villagers. Besides, there was still enough money left to enrol him at any nearest boarding school of his choice offering Advanced Level classes.

Bomani packed his clothes, borrowed money from a distant relative in a nearby village and travelled to Kasungu where he found work as a temporal teacher at a government primary school. He wrote home notifying his father of his whereabouts and employment. Chooloka responded he couldn't have a dissident for a son and had disowned him on the day he left Chapola Village, stating that by disregarding his father's wish he had turned his back on his roots and ancestors. Chooloka warned him not to set foot in his homestead again, or attend his funeral should he learn of his death. If Bomani paid no heed to the warning, he risked inviting further calamity in his ruined life. The last sentence of the letter was in red ink. The line, in non-ambiguous words, stated he would break tradition by leaving his estate to Benita.

Bomani hadn't minded his father disowning him. He remained focused on seeing to it his mother would receive medical attention and live. When payday arrived, he looked forward to buying a few decent clothes and groceries, settling his bills and travelling to the village to take his mother to a doctor in either Lilongwe or Blantyre, but Malawi's civil service payroll was in a state of shambles. His name wasn't on it. Two fellow temporal teachers at the same school he joined the Civil Service with on the same day got their salaries.

Bomani believed his father had cast an evil spell on him. Reason told him to convert to Christianity as a counter measure. He became a member of a local Baptist Church. Sympathetic teachers lent him money without him asking, something he attributed to the intervention of the Holy Spirit. The second month dragged because he was counting the days and looked forward to receiving his salary twofold. Payday came with another dampener: again, the computer at Lilongwe had skipped his name. He stopped going to church and

shelved his belief in Christ. Again, benevolent schoolteachers lent him money.

Halfway into the third month, he received a soothing letter from his father who claimed he was now a member of Chapola's small Watch Tower community. The letter was apologetic and invited him to come home immediately. Anything apologetic or sympathetic was outside his father's character. However, the letter made no mention of ailing Cheruna. Was his mother dead? Was the letter not a ploy inviting him to be beheaded or speared? Bomani feared the cunning fox was luring him to his death so that he wouldn't return to the village someday when Choolooka was dead to lay claim to the homestead, the fields, the tractor and the booming herd of cattle. The motive for the letter seemed murder.

Choolooka enclosed in the envelope an amount equivalent to about half of Bomani's monthly salary. While returning home was dangerous, if he stayed, no guarantee assured him a computer in the Salaries Bureau in Lilongwe wouldn't skip his name again. Senior teachers at the school told him some newly recruited teachers received an accumulation of their salaries after several months, a period that ranged from three to six months, at least, or could be longer than that.

With his mother ill, half a year was longer than eternity, and he was nostalgic about life in a village he hadn't left for longer than a week all his life. Returning home outweighed staying despite the odds. Giving a few days notice as stated by Malawian Law, he lodged a resignation letter with the headmaster, plugging his ears against his superior's futile persuasion to endure a few more months.

Looking forward to reuniting with his father, at about noon the following Friday, Bomani boarded a bus from Kasungu to Salima, where another one, rural and dilapidated, took him to Chapola Village on the shore of Lake Malawi, a journey of about six hours. He took with him all his belongings, which weren't much because he hadn't added anything to the basic things he brought with him from

the village. Suddenly it seemed foolish he had left the village without Cholooka's blessings.

From the day he left the village, he had wanted to return and embrace his father, and tell him he loved him but was only venturing out for the sake of his ailing mother. Now he was on his way back home, wondering what the reception would be like. From Cheruna he wasn't expecting much apart from a stare and then a weak smile of recognition, if she were still alive. He guessed she was alive; his father couldn't have overlooked her death in the letter, though he was perceivably devilish. Perhaps he had, who understood the heartless man?

The sun was ironically setting when Bomani, an object of dejection and fear, arrived in the village. No one was on the footpath that linked numerous homesteads. Walking home with his head bowed, he thought of the colourful days when young people who had sojourned overseas returned to thunderous drumbeats and bashful feasting. On such days, cattle and goats were slaughtered, whistling and ululating stole order. The sojourners often bore numerous gifts, for the village chief, the council of elders and their families. Bomani was in the same clothes he left the village in and bore nothing. He was a humiliation to himself, his family and the village.

Their homestead appeared ahead. Apart from smoke spiralling from the roof of the cooking hut detached from the brick house, there appeared to be no life in the homestead. As he entered the rustic gate of the irregular stockade, he noticed his mother lying on a reed mat under a tree a few paces from the cooking hut. The door to the hut was ajar. Cheruna was in one of her old dresses and motionless. Something on the hut's hearth fire caught his attention. It was huge, aflame or engulfed in flames. Was his father barbecuing a pig to mark his homecoming?

A few paces into the homestead, he put down his baggage and approached his mother nervously, afraid she had just died and his father wasn't yet aware. When he was a couple of metres from her

inert figure, a strong stench of burning flesh from the cooking hut hit his nostrils. His father couldn't be in the hut; if he were, the meat wouldn't burn. Cholooka was probably away, which apprehensively confirmed his fear: Cheruna had just died in the open, forlorn and dejected. When he reached his mother, his palms were moist with sweat. A cold settled on him. If she was dead, Cholooka was now his unpardonable enemy. He stooped over her, but his knees buckled and he sank on them beside her. She lay on her back, her eyes staring fixedly at the sky. He felt faint, his eyes clouding. Then he noticed a movement on her chest. She was breathing. She blinked twice and turned her gaze at him, inquisitively as though he was intruding on her privacy.

You're alive, a thought he expressed aloud, sighing with relief, but noticing she was paler and bonier than ever. He wanted to assure her her health was his immediate concern and he would see to it she lived, but a squeaky grunt from the cooking hut drew his attention before he spoke a word. The not-so-unfamiliar noise distantly rang a bell in his head, his heart nearly missing a beat. The barbecue, or whatever it was, on the fire was convalescing.

Had his father, a purported Christian, put a live sacrifice on the hearth? He straightened and walked towards the hut, straining to see what was unfolding in its growing darkness. With each step he took, the stench of burning flesh grew stronger. His heart pounded, a hunch alerting him something was terribly wrong. He broke into a run and came to a dead halt by the entrance to the hut. His eyes bulged, transfixed on the roasting body on the fire, his mind refusing to accept the painful reality before his eyes. His lips quivered as his eyelids jitterbugged.

His father's badly burnt head and neck were on cherry ambers at the convergence of burning cork tree logs. The poor man was irretrievably lost somewhere between the vagaries of epileptic seizures and death. His limbs jerked as he convulsed and grunted between waning gurgling sounds, his eyes grey, lifeless and fixed, his

brow was furrowing. His left eye bulged, popped out and hung by thin juddering ligaments against the temple. For some seconds it swayed before it fell into the embers.

In his right hand, Cholooka continuously clutched and unclutched a piece of paper with floral decorations in the margins. A closer look revealed it was a leaf plucked from a flower-patterned writing pad. Suddenly a hissing sound came from the fire. Flames flared around his father's head, engulfing it. For some seconds Bomani couldn't understand why the fire had hissed and scathing tongues of fire leapt. Though the scene had arrested his senses for a while, a part of his mind abruptly suggested his father was salvageable.

Bomani stepped into the hut and grabbed his father's ankles to pull him from the fire. At the same time it suggested itself that Cholooka's neck arteries had ruptured and were fuelling the fire with oxygenated blood; hence the hissing and the surge. Nevertheless, he dragged his father's twitching, smouldering corpse from the fire and the hut, an occurrence that haunted him ever since. Leaving the body some metres from the hut, he entered the brick house in a stupor and emerged immediately with a blanket which he covered the body with, partly in reverence, partly to smother the smoke, partly to cover the horror. Plumes rose from the shrouded body convulsing under the blanket.

Bomani glanced at his mother on the reed mat. She was distant and nonchalant. He looked down at the body, mystified, wishing some elderly person could come to help and console him forthwith. Suddenly he thought he heard the *Gule Wamkulu* spiritual cry "*Ubo-uh!*" coming from the body. The cry was faint, almost imperceptible. It sounded once and the body was still. Had he imagined the cry? The question didn't seem pertinent at the time.

Then he remembered the piece of paper in his father hand, partially uncovered the corpse and carefully pried the paper from the fingers of the dead man. It was a missive in Benita's distinct hand. He

shoved the letter into a hip pocket and ran to inform their nearest neighbour.

Afterwards, when the body was in the sitting room and a score of baffled, bewildered and cursing villagers had gathered to keep vigil according to custom, he read the letter privately by the light of a paraffin lamp. Benita had written about a Norwegian suitor living in Paris, an imminent customary marriage in Chapola Village, and a lavish reception at a motel in Oslo. Teardrops fell from his eyes onto the letter. Days later, he concluded the letter was the culprit that killed his father. The pending marriage triggered the seizures and cast his father into the fire, an epileptic warned against being too sorrowful or overexcited.

Suddenly a piece of rock fell to the base of the shaft, jerking Bomani out of his haunting recollections to the present, which came as a relief. What date was it and where was he? It was 1 December. His henchmen, a young hostage and he were in a tunnel of a disused mine to the west of Sakis Mine. The rock that fell was an “all clear” signal from his gunman at the surface. It was time to wake everyone, climb out and continue the journey to ground zero, a vintage westward rendezvous that would drain Binga of all his strength and courage. Bomani looked forward to the encounter. The meeting place was spiritual and convenient for a person of Bomani’s disposition.

Chapter 35

Evans Emedhi glanced at his defaced digital wristwatch flicking 11:55 hrs, all the while feeling like a character in a nightmare. The hospital visiting hour was drawing close. This being December 5, his visit to the institute would be his fifth ever since he started visiting the teenager on December 1.

He wriggled into a threadbare, short-sleeved two-piece grey safari suit, his wardrobe's main attraction. The room was a rickety clay hut dominated by a spring-and-steel angle-iron bed. His wife, Stembile, walked in as he sat on a low-wooden stool, forcing one foot after the other into worn-out dusty black leather shoes so irregularly stitched and patched that they drew attention and appeared clownish.

Stembile sat on the bed, tacit, her eyes lugubriously on the dug-smear floor. "I'd a bad dream last night," she began after a while. "Don't go to that hospital again. Mr Keneas should go there himself. Remegio is *his* subordinate."

He sighed with exasperation and thought for a while. "All you've done all your life is dream bad dreams about everybody and yourself. If you don't dream about menacing clouds, rampaging, demon-possessed cattle and either you or me cast in a pit full of pythons, you dream about graves, ghosts and our dead relatives chasing us into oblivion. I don't go to church, but I can tell you're satanic. If I'd married someone else, I'd have been prosperous today. Your evil ancestral spirits bog me down."

She continued to stare at the floor. "Won't you ask me what I dreamt about?"

"If you're a *sangoma*, why is our underwear tattered and torn? Why do I've to clean the Greek's offices and run errands when we can make a better living from your rare gift?" He looked at the mediumistic black, white and blue beards around her neck, wrists and

ankles, and pitied her. “You’re shackled and captive in a free country.”

“In the dream, Mr Gilchrist Keneas cast you in a concrete plaster. You could neither breathe nor move a finger, therefore you sort-of died. The next moment it was Remegio in the plaster.”

He laughed. “And then?”

“I can’t remember exactly how it ended. What I know is that it ended in a tragedy.”

“I don’t see what qualifies it as a bad dream. It’s a pity you’re predisposed to perceiving evil in all things. You’re the worst thing that ever happened in my life.” He meant every word of what he was saying, but he knew no amount of vile words would hurt her.

“Are you done vilifying your wife, Mr Emedhi, father of my three children, grandfather to eight?”

He said thoughtfully, “This is my time to soar like an eagle. I’m visiting that boy in Mr Keneas’ shoes. My ancestors want to pull me out of poverty. You’ll bask in my reflected light.” He tied his shoes, spat on them, wiped them with a cloth and stared at her, his face disdain incarnate.

She seemed to recall something. “After you became Remegio in the plaster, the whole thing turned into an inert wooden masquerade the height of a man, fierce as death. A column of thick smoke rose from the mask’s feather-plumed fontanel,” she said, touching the top of her head. “The mask grew and changed into a steam locomotive, complete with shrill whistles and the unbearable noise of metal thrusting against metal, horns blowing endlessly, seemingly signalling the advent of danger. The locomotive moved, jerking and vibrating from too much pressurised power. Railway lines suddenly appeared and it went round disrupting life in the compound.”

“Please let me go. We’ll have time for innovative fairy tales and folklore too when I return.” He rose, set to walk out, but restrained himself. It would be rude and grossly uncouth to walk out when his wife was speaking.

This marriage is a curse, he thought. He last kissed her several years ago soon after she stopped brushing her teeth and bathing daily. Coincidentally, he learnt then that menopause was upon her, distorting her sense of values, her understanding of marriage and what life was all about. She started depriving him of his conjugal rights, rendering herself his undeclared enemy. Perhaps she still loved him, and this expression of her concern was her way of saying he was still dear to her. Her yellow teeth, interrupted with some as black as peppercorns, discouraged him from desiring her. Could he convince her to pick the toothbrush again and brush her teeth daily until they sparkled the way they did when he first saw her? Could she not see that the marriage had turned into a colourless flower?

“The locomotive suddenly derailed and careened through the compound in a narrowing spiral. People screamed helplessly as it ploughed through their dwellings, reducing to shreds of flesh, and blotches of blood anyone in its way. Many people and livestock died. Debris and rubble forced the engine to halt after finally ploughing through this house, ending up shrouded in a miasma of smoke that stung the eyes.”

He didn't know what to say, whether to thank her or to rebuke her for wasting his time. “Quite an elaborate dream, thank God you're still dreaming. Some of us ceased to dream when we were deprived of sex.” He quickly walked out of the room, emerging into a gay sunlit day threatened by converging gloomy thunderous clouds.

As he walked towards the office building, he thought about his wife. Her foible was fear and nothing but fear. Because of fear she revered the ancestors excessively and hoped someday to become a *sangoma* in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, or a territorial spirit medium, if she chose to stay in Zimbabwe; hence she experienced strange dreams all the time. If all went well and the current Zulu traditional leadership accepted her claims, the best she could become was a tribal spiritual adviser, she hoped. Now and then, a great, great Nguni paternal grandfather possessed her, especially when he

attempted to be intimate with her. She would shove him from her, commanding him in a no-nonsense masculine voice not to touch her. He discovered this abnormality after he had paid the bride price in full to her Ndebele parents in Tsholotsho.

On the first night, which was some thirty-seven years ago, she pushed him away from her when he mutely made advances. Assuming she was timid and shy, he had blown the kerosene lamp and felt for her in the cover of darkness. She panted increasingly when his fingers roamed her neck, shoulders and then bosom. Then they had descended, slowly and hesitantly in his awkward, unseasoned way of smooching, and came to rest playfully in the region of her navel. In all honesty, amateur in these matters, he hadn't known how to handle her. When his hands descended further, she growled and clawed his chest, drawing blood, and ordered him in a baritone to stop what he was doing. Recoiling, he clutched his chest and sat up in the hewn bed of his parental rural home on the plains of Zambia.

She sat up too, not yet done verbally with him. In a mezzo-soprano, she told him to respect Nguni ancestral elders, because they had taken the trouble to journey all the way from Dlinza, which it described as a grave-like forest of mediation in the hills of Eshowe in Zululand. Beginning with the wanderer Zulu, moving on to his son Phunga, then Mageba, Ndaba, Jama and Senzangakhona, the voice gave him a spontaneous recital of the Nguni lineage that culminated in the formation of the Zulu tribe.

Immediately her voice had changed into a guttural one that babbled about a sprawling land of hills, valleys and battlefields with spent cartridges and broken assegais. Then for over an hour, the voice proudly talked about how the Zulus humiliated the British column at the Isandlwana battlefield.

Another voice took over in the wee hours of the morning, scherzo-like, announcing itself as the eater of vipers and a friend of the mermaids in both the Black and the White Mfolozi River and seer

of things futuristic. Finally, her purported great, great grandfather displaced the other spirits, unhurried, slow and laconic. The voice said it was Jama speaking, and spoke of fistfights, of drowning in millet beer, of love and feuds and the endless breaking of virgins on rock fells and in burning villages, and raids for women and livestock, and evil spirits lurking at the edge of a flat land. When the rays of a sun rising in the east filtered into their hut, the spirits left her. She was tired and sweating, having been upon her all night.

His immediate reaction was to divorce her forthwith, and demand the bride price he paid, but Stembile's hoary aunt convinced him the spirits possessing her were noble and would eventually lead the two of them to prosperity and fame. The aunt coached him on how to prostrate before the spirits and coerce them into dispossessing her when he wanted to be intimate with his wife. The task was arduous; the spirits were too many and expected him to persuade them individually. Thus, through pleading and chanting praises of Nguni and Zulu personalities unknown to him and his family, he had sired three children with her, all of them redundant, victims of a stalled economy, and staying with him and their families in his crammed quarters at Sakis Mine.

Now he was fifty-seven and she was fifty-three. Her dream of being a Zulu luminary hadn't come into fruition. For thirty-seven years, he lived under a supernatural fallacy foreign spirits of bloodthirsty warriors and diviners would elevate them to wealth and prominence. The whole thing, he thought as he approached the mine office, was nothing but faecal rubbish and vomit. For all these years, he was foolish enough to listen to the utterances of unknown spirits, and bowing to them. He had lived on hope, but hope on its own was retrogressive and an expression of lunacy and fear.

When his wife's aunt spoke about Stembile's spirits, he had come close to apprehending the elusory reality of life and what drove it, that those destined to prosper would prosper, and those predestination earmarked for scrounging and poverty would scrounge

and suffer. It had felt good to be husband to a woman highly favoured of God and the ancestors, especially powerful Nguni ancestors from across the Limpopo, men of prowess in war and divinity.

Though his wife lived in the darkness of the night of the unknown, he suspected Jatropha's baseless prophecy influenced her inscrutable dream. He wasn't going to attack anyone with an axe or otherwise. It was a demonic prophecy by a diabolic prophet bent on raising alarm while offering no *kundiso*, a spiritual solution that allayed fears and proved the all-conquering power of God.

His bearing that of a man about to soar like an eagle to the chagrin of his detractors, especially the prophet of doom now berserk, Emedhi left the compound and walked past the gold mill. The ore pounder was quiet and motionless. Since the brute that came to the mine had promised to return with his team, no employee wanted the devils to find him at the mill.

However, Jatropha had foreseen the coming of the *demon in human form*, which made his heart sink. Perchance he too would split heads open as prophesied. No, he wasn't going to axe anybody. The odds were more against the doomed prophet than they were against him, a man in his faculties shying from axes and brawls. No one but Matipa knew in detail what happened to the so-called *Man of God*, but she wasn't telling anyone. Her silence was now irksome. Perhaps she was already mourning Peza whom everyone feared the demon killed gruesomely like a sacrificial ram, the only logical conclusion.

Glancing to the right, he saw people gathered at Akar Muja's house, a small group of confused mourners unsure whether to utter condolences or wait until someone discovered the boy's body. Looking ahead, he walked on. Rumour had it the elderly were already hinting Matipa about the ritualistic burial of the head of a goat in a symbolic grave in the coming few days to put an end to the uncertainty and the mourning. He wouldn't join the confusion again.

Now as Emedhi left the compound and sauntered towards the Harare-Bulawayo highway, he was convinced Jatrophu deserved the madness upon him, a reward for delving in things spiritual and playing with God's holy name. In the forests, the so-called prophet was chasing mostly women and young girls, shouting and gesturing that he wanted to have sexual intercourse with them. To men, he bellowed he was the Prophet Isaiah, nude for the sake of spiritual development for the edification of the Church, and therefore shunning society.

However, quite a number had denounced the apostolic faith in the wake of Remegio's immolation. More renounced it when their leader and high priest lost his sanity. Nevertheless, some believers hung on, speculating the Man of God's nakedness could be as bidden as that of the Prophet Isaiah whose three-year nudity God ordered. They concurred; believers who elected to reason placed themselves in the province of non-believers earmarked for the sulphur and brimstone of Hell.

Apart from the small gathering at Akar's house and the few people he met here and there, the compound seemed deserted. The intervention of the police was pathetic and faecal, he thought, and the force had withdrawn the remaining armed details that morning "until there were further developments". Where was Akar Muja? What crime did Muja commit against the savage that necessitated the setting of a fellow human being on fire and the kidnapping of his son? Whether bad blood or rivalry existed between the evil hostage taker and Muja, by letting the brutes find Sakis Mine, ancestral spirits had forsaken Remegio and *Madzimai* Matipa. He strongly suspected it was through their eccentric religion and faith in Baba Johannes' gods and familiar angels that they had courted such a grave disaster in their lives. Both belonged to a faith founded by a man entombed at Dandadzi, a man who never resurrected.

He pitied the believers for their spiritual ignorance and suability, something he saw as akin to bestiality. They had their own gods and

spirits, some local, some territorial, but like deranged men who left their matrimonial wives to lie down with cows and donkeys under the cover of darkness, locals publicly deserted their gods and spirits. First, the white man came toting the Bible, head tilted in religious humility, and hoodwinked chiefs and tribesmen into embracing a foreign deity. Decades later in 1932, using the same tricks, a fellow African reconverted the majority of believers into an apostolic cult now courting calamity for everybody at the mine. Out of the melee, he, Evans Emedhi, was now gaining favour and recognition from his boss.

Before long, he was standing along the highway. Traffic was sparse, which reminded him of biting Western sanctions against Zimbabwe. Half an hour later, a commuter omnibus screeched to a halt where he stood. He climbed aboard. Sullen men and women packed the bus. Most of the women were pregnant, and in pregnancy-unfriendly apparel. A good number of the others carried noisy suckling, amulet-laden children on their laps. The interior of the bus reeked of urine, odorous armpits and millet beer. The composite odour was suffocating. The economy had subdued everyone, but it had failed to tone down the virility of men, he thought, procreation in the time of AIDS, swine flu and cholera. Neither had it abated men's thirst for millet beer gulped in cupfuls, a triune brew, food, drink and an aphrodisiac in one mug.

Bob Marley music was blaring: *How long shall we let them kill our prophets while we stand aside and watch.* The conductor sang along with the late musician, baring marijuana and grime-stained teeth. Like one in the throes of lunacy, the conductor shook his head, eyes closed, manifestly like a Rastafarian oracle. The music forced Emedhi to think of Jatropha again. The charlatan was alive but naked and demented. What would become of the devil's tool? It confounded him an amorous man running haywire in the forests still had the power to mesmerise a following. Where were the demons that spoke through him?

After about twenty minutes, he alighted in the City of Kadoma, a town bemoaning its fading glory, and proceeded to a supermarket to buy oranges and bananas, the basic fruits everyone seemed to take to hospitalised patients. The mill manager had given him a ten-dollar note, for bus fare and small necessities *Madzibaba* Remegio might need. Walking towards the section marked 'fruits & vegetables' he looked at marked prices pegged in US dollars. They were exorbitant, little wonder many people were wasted and cases of Kwashiorkor were rife when food items were abundant in retail outlets.

For a bunch of bananas, four oranges and five apples, Emedhi parted with five dollars, which piqued him; the reminder of the money was his for keeps. He was sure pronounceable gain awaited him at the mine. Mr Keneas couldn't have singled him for nothing. Was it because he was elderly, respectable and the most reasonable in the current crop of employees at Sakis Mine? In his eyes, his fellow workers were wolves that thrashed their wives with clenched fists and booted feet at the slightest provocation, semi-civilised baboons that drank themselves senseless on payday.

He was heading to Ward 4, the Burns Ward. Though the hospital was dilapidated, the floors were polished and smelled of disinfectant. Some sections of the hospital were pristinely clean. The hospital staff he came across in the long passages and corridors, from nurses to support personnel in pink and blue uniforms, was sad and lethargic in bearing, an overt demonstration of lack of motivation. He sympathized with the nurses; they were educated and had endured three years of training, only to earn as meagrely as he did.

He thought of his wife. She was a miasma of darkness, a living relic. People of Stembile's beliefs were odd elements in the modern society. God should've been angry on the day he first met her years ago when she was a vivacious, petite teenager. Despite the apparent spirits that possessed her, from the day he married her, she was his waking thought, reason to live and celebrate life. He tolerated her spirits until the year her assets started to sag and she began shunning

the bathroom, a hovel, as if a crocodile resided in it. Wishing his mind not to conceive unpronounceable statements, he walked on, drawing closer to the Burns Ward, to Remegio.

In what state would he find him? Perhaps the teenager died yesterday after he left, and his body was reposing in the solitary mortuary among dozens of corpses awaiting an under-funded paupers' burial. There were strong chances Remegio was dead. He hated to be the one to break the sad news to the compound. Emedhi pondered the odd situation. *Madzibaba* Jatropha was now a libidinous lunatic still commanding respect and awe among his followers. The acolyte was in hospital, dead or recovering from grievous burns. The rewards of evil spirits boggled him.

The Burns Ward was a bend away when Emedhi heard a distraught man shouting ahead. Strangely, he discerned the voice as that of Remegio, forceful and threatening, apparently frenzied. The echoes of the hospital's long corridors blurred most of the words. The sound of shattering glass and feminine screams followed, desperate and fearful, dying suddenly. The noise of doors banging shut ensued. The voice came again, confident, authoritative. The name *Bomani* was loud and clear, like a dreaded battle cry. Was it the youthful acolyte shouting or a deranged patient? Remegio was too feeble to speak with such tremendous force.

Emedhi stopped: Bomani could be in the ward. Stembile had vainly dissuaded him from going to the hospital. Turning back and fleeing while he could, made sense. Emedhi was scared of Bomani. On the afternoon the brute set Remegio on fire, the office orderly neither witnessed the attack nor saw Bomani and his team. Everything took place in a short space of time, but he heard Remegio's frantic screams. Emedhi emerged from his sleeping hut when the teenager's cries had subsided to a howl. Like many people who rushed out to investigate the cause of the disturbance when it was perceivably safe to do so, he found Remegio smouldering on the ground.

As he gaped at the wounds and simultaneously learnt the brutes had also kidnapped Peza, Emedhi had no doubt only a monster could commit such crimes. Smouldering at his feet was proof a man with a morbid soul and a sick mind had visited the compound. The few compound-dwellers who saw Bomani described him as a stone-faced pulsating devil in trendy clothes. Emedhi feared the brute had long killed Peza.

The office orderly shook as he stood in the deserted passage. He foresaw Bomani setting him ablaze. What would he report to the mill manager if he stopped shy of the ward? Hesitantly, he resumed walking. If indeed it was the teenager, then something was terribly askance. Emedhi was three paces from the bend when the voice shouted again. Though initially most of the words were indistinct, the voice was patently *Madzibaba* Remegio's, an unmistakable baritone, which brought a shudder over him, a fear he instinctively knew wasn't baseless.

"Dark clouds hover!" the familiar voice shouted. "Only fools gather under them expecting bliss!"

Stopping briefly, resolved to turn back and run, he told himself the worst thing to fear was usually fear itself, an inconceivable phenomenon. What was happening in Remegio's unit? Emedhi took the bend, curiosity driving him, but fear curbing him from running. Remegio's unit was a couple of doors down a polished corridor. Four female nurses were peering fearfully into the unit through the Judas windows in its double doors. Emedhi approached nervously.

What was unfolding in the unit that scared stiff four nurses? His curiosity rose. Soon he was behind the nurses, immediately realising they were standing on shards of shattered glass. Cringing expressions on their faces said it all; there was commotion in Remegio's unit. The panes of the Judas windows were broken. Standing behind the nurses and looking into the unit through a gap between the heads of two of the nurses, he peered into the unit, now a silent chamber from which groans and grunts emanated.

The scene before Emedhi drained him of strength. The room was a shambles. Remegio, an animated pinkish raw wound, lay face down on the floor amid bloodstained tiles. Without the bandages, he looked scary, like some virulent, subhuman monster. Three male nurses pinned the teenager to the floor. One had his knee in the small of Remegio's back and holding his wrists, the patient's arms painfully twisted. The second pressed the teenager's head and shoulder's down with his knees and hands. The third had the acolyte's ankles locked under his armpits.

Remegio was wriggling and shifting, jerking and rocking the men. The man almost riding Remegio had a swollen left eye. The one pressing his head and shoulders down was bleeding through the nose, his blood falling on Remegio's face and neck. The uniforms of the three men were torn, dishevelled and bloody in several places. Pulsating veins were traceable on shirtless Remegio's arms, and the nurse's blood falling on the teenager painted him devilish. Near the foursome, an elderly Indian doctor in a blue gown and wearing a stethoscope around his neck was frantically drawing a drug into a syringe.

At first glance, the doctor appeared to be the only one in the unit who hadn't been beaten or manhandled. When Emedhi looked at him from top to bottom, he noticed he had one shoe on and his shirt collar was torn. In the corner of his lips was a small trickle of blood, which was widening. With the unit's bed, trays and cabinets upturned, steel oxygen gas bottles on the floor, medicines and bandages strewn all over, and the bedding scattered, everything was testament to a violent fracas preceding Emedhi's arrival.

Remegio shouted, "What medical procedure can void the beckoning of the eater of souls? Pass the speaker to the mortuary attendant whose job is to render service to the dead! I declare him dead! Cover him in death-cloths! On him the final curtain came done, but alas you waste medical expertise on a corpse!"

"My God," Emedhi hissed quietly, "he's possessed."

“No,” one of the nurses volunteered without turning to look at him. “It’s a serious bout of post-traumatic hallucination.”

The medical terms vexed Emedhi. “The boy is certainly possessed. Surely something has taken possession of him.”

The nurse turned and looked at him. “Oh, you’re a relative? Thank God you’re here”

“No. I’m a workmate. Actually, I’m here in my manager’s shoes. Does this usually happen in this ward?”

“Yes, but it’s more typical of car accident patients. I suppose the injuries in his head explain the traumatic shock. I’m not a doctor. I suppose the young man is seeing things.”

“He’s possessed. A prophesied demon attacked him. Everyone at the mine knows it.”

The four nurses in the corridor turned their heads and looked at him, baffled. From their expressions, he deduced the hospital staff didn’t know exactly what had happened to Remegio. For that reason, they didn’t know what was in their hands. All they had done was attend to severe burns and sew up axe cuts in his head, thirteen deep wounds. Nobody bothered to tell them the perpetrators stuffed him with unknown ground juju. Remegio was probably a zombie now, or some tool of malevolence.

Emedhi bemoaned the lack of a traditional divination referral division at the hospital. ZINATHA (the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association), which should’ve been given office space at the institution naturally should’ve taken care of the teenager. The authorities, by designing and equipping the hospital along western lines, failed Remegio the way they failed many patients because Africa was the home of voodoo, goblins and deadly spirits.

In the unit, Remegio was becoming more aggressive. He shouted spiritedly, banging his forehead against the floor, the suicidal violence seemingly agitating him further like a distressed scorpion stinging itself in the head to derange itself with fury. “Sakis Mine, you shall not know peace until Binga presents himself to Bomani! By the

power of the gods reposing in the depths of Lake Malawi, Bomani bans all church gatherings at the mine compound and in the surrounding hills! Bomani declares bloodshed and mayhem! A jackal that wandered into the compound was the harbinger! As tree stumps bleed sap, the rivals shall clash.”

The doctor and his syringe were soon ready. Stepping on Remegio’s left elbow with his shoeless foot to press it down, he knelt and swiftly injected the syringe’s contents into the acolyte’s forearm. The doctor threw the syringe away and assisted the others in holding him down, a strenuous task. The patient continued to jerk and turn, wince and grimace, until Emedhi could see his face, a skinless mask with dark pools for eyes. After about a minute, Remegio’s agitation diminished. Finally, the teenager sighed, yawned and lay limb, the pools staring. The doctor placed him in the First-Aid recovery position, his face to the double doors. Only then did the nurses and the doctor let go of him to nurse their own injuries as they looked down at him and shrugged, some shaking their heads.

“I gave Dr Singh *fazadinium*,” one of the nurses in the corridor said in disbelief, her eyes on Remegio. “I gave him the highest possible dosage! Anything higher is lethal! The rapid action of the anaesthetic slides a patient into a coma-like sleep within one minute, but he’s still conscious. Look at his fists. They’re clenching and unclenching.”

Remegio turned and lay on his back, startling the nurses and the doctor who stepped away from him as if on cue. Almost mechanically, the raw wound sat up and stared at one of the Judas windows, now gaps. The stare was penetrating.

Since he wasn’t the only one looking threw the gaps perhaps whatever was in Remegio, was trying to psyche the nurses in the corridor into going away. Emedhi locked eyes with him. His stomach grumbled, his heart thundered like a triple hammer and his armpits moistened. He concluded his wife was right and he shouldn’t have come. There was more risk than blessing in the obligation.

“Thank you for coming to see him, Mr Evans Emedhi,” Remegio suddenly said in a placid tone, his voice almost sangfroid and appealing for help. “You’re the only one taking time to see him, a complete nonentity to you and your people, the Barotse on the plains of Zambia. You’re a sojourner seeking bread and wealth, which you must take to your father, Baroni Weni. On 17 June, he’ll be eighty-two. Jaundice, Bilharzias and high-blood pressure afflict him, but you’re his reason for hanging on. He intends to bless you before he leaves this world. Make an effort to visit your father before he passes on.”

Emedhi couldn’t believe it. Indeed his father was Baroni Weni, a Barotse living in a Zambian village. On 17 June, he would turn eighty-two as prophesied. Baroni Weni had always suffered from the said diseases. Emedhi was pleased to learn that his father, whom he had long lost touch with for decades since he emigrated from Zambia, was alive and hoping to bless him before his passage. Despite himself, Emedhi smiled at the skinless mask. He wanted to ask if his mother was still alive and he would someday return to his people in Zambia laden with wealth, but the voice continued.

“What’s the reward for your heartfelt compassion?”

“I was asked to come here. Credit should go to Mr Gilchrist Keneas.”

“Today I break tradition and reward the messenger.” He stretched his right hand. “Come and shake my hand. What other gesture of appreciation could come from a hospitalised person? Come, Mr Emedhi, a pure blood Barotse, the only son to Baroni Weni and Christina. You come from a royal family living in obscurity. Your grandfather, Tsenga, due to hegemony, was robbed of the throne, which is the reason Baroni Weni is not the village chief today. I pledge my life to see to it that the Government of Zambia crowns your father before Baroni’s next birthday, and the vast tracts of rolling Barotse land are ceded to your people.”

Everyone looked at Emedhi, seeking confirmation of the utterances.

Emedhi nodded. "It's all true. He speaks the truth."

Without doubt, the whole thing was a shrouded blessing. He reached for the door handle, but the nurse who vexed him with medical jargon firmly held his wrist.

"You can't get in, the patient isn't sedated. He's dangerous."

"What do you know about the Barotse and the stolen chieftainship?" he hissed at her, jerking his hand free. "You've no idea what his words mean to me. If you put your wicked hand on me again I'll flay you alive!"

"But, sir—"

She couldn't continue; oracular Remegio was speaking again. "Mr Emedhi, prince and heir-apparent to the Barotse, you give me the impression of a playing-mantis. Why do you hesitate? If your gallant people were to see you demurring like a toddler scared stiff of a plastic doll, would they be proud of you? Do you not know a dying man has the ability to make or unmake a man... plainly the ability to bless or curse?"

"I forbid you to come in!" the Indian doctor barked. "I think you should leave and wait in the foyer until you're called!"

Emedhi made a scornful face and shook his head. "Can't anyone see the boy has good intentions?"

"Call security!" the doctor ordered.

A nurse, petrified ever since Emedhi stood at the door, left running and vanished behind a bend. Any time from now, hospital security personnel would mob and subdue Emedhi with truncheons in the so-called administration of minimum force, which was always euphemism for a thorough beating.

Afraid another opportunity wouldn't come; Emedhi held the door handle, turned it and marched into the unit. His entry infuriated everyone inside. The men warned him against getting closer to the patient, but he had made himself deaf to their calls. Gingerly he

walked towards Remegio. The teenager's hand remained stretched. Each step he took was a step closer to authority, power and wealth, a step towards self-actualisation. Whatever was speaking in Remegio represented his ascension to a throne. Baroni Weni and his mother would be proud of him for the bold steps.

When he reached Remegio, placed the fruits before him and knelt to take his extended hand, he noticed the teenager's palm was a suppurating open blister. He stopped, the men in the room falling silent.

"Shake my hand," Remegio urged firmly. "Shake it."

Now on his knees, Emedhi looked at his own palm and at Remegio's. Stembile crossed his mind. He hesitated, but only for a while, and extended his hand to the acolyte, avoiding the dark pools that were his eyes. He expected the teenager to wince or groan in pain on contact, and his grip to be feeble, but Remegio grip was like a vice.

"Kill him," Remegio commanded, sternly.

"Kill who?" Emedhi's voice was croaky.

"*Madzibaba* Remegio. It's the only way to get him out of his agony. He's thirteen cuts in his head. His whole body is a wound. Are you like them?" Remegio gestured at the men in the unit. "They forfeit his God-given autarchy over *his* life...his to live to its fullness or thwart when he faces a threat worse than death itself. You should know that murder, after all, ceases to be murder when the motive is mercy. Is altruism a foreign word in this country?"

Emedhi trembled. "Let me go."

Remegio laughed; a metallic ha-ha-ha. "Kill him or you're about to see my anger."

"You're not Remegio. Who're you?"

"I've many names. Athenians call me Atropos. The Yoruba call me *Sango*. The Shona call me *Chikara*. The Bambuti call me *Tore*; the *Gate of the Abyss*. The Dinka call me *Macardit*, the final explanation of suffering and misfortune." He inhaled loudly.

Emedhi shuddered. The words Remegio was uttering were foreign and not the least those of an Ordinary Level dropout. The oratorical flourishes were satanic. The voice had a distinct hollowness and a slight echo as if the speaker was in a drum.

“Let go of my hand,” Emedhi begged, vainly pulling and jerking his hand and appealing to the doctor and male nurses in the unit, all paling and visibly cowering. “Help me. He won’t let go. Please help me. Someone help me.”

“Get me a dose of *propofol*!” the doctor shouted to the nurses in the corridor.

No one in the unit moved.

Emedhi heard the footsteps of someone running away from the door. The footsteps faded in the corridor. Time palpably stood still for some seconds.

The mechanical laughter came again, brief and unsettling as the words. “You stand on the threshold of wealth, the acquisition of large tracts of virgin land, hundreds of cattle and a dozen virgin girls, yours to deflower. Do I’ve to beg you to perform a simple act for you to gain entry into a world of plenitude, honour and etiquette? Like a moron you ask irrelevant questions.”

“Whoever you’re, let me go. I had no hand in your brutalisation.”

“Emedhi son of Baroni Weni, for years, drought and poverty ravaged your family in Zambia. The rains have come now. Look me in the eyes or you invite my wrath.”

No other option existed for him except to comply and avoid harm. He looked into the dark eyes, his mouth slowly gaping. The eyes were petulant, cold and reptilian. The prophetic conundrum could see inside him. Was it a demon? Was it death incarnate? The dishevelled unit and the cringing, beaten, cowering staff were enough proof that tremendous power to harm physically lay in the teenager.

Remegio leaned forward, pulling him closer, as if to say something passionate to his face, but to Emedhi’s admixture of chagrin and shock, he spat a clot of saliva, which landed on his

tongue and glided to the back of his throat, immediately giving Emedhi a choking sensation. Involuntarily, Emedhi swallowed it.

Remegio let go of his hand as two security details burst into the unit. The unexpected release flung Emedhi backwards, his head hitting the tiled floor with a thud. The ceiling whirled in his eyes. Blurred faces converged above him and descended. The stench of blood filled his nostrils. His limbs stiffened, beginning with the toes and the fingers. Sight deserted Emedhi before he passed out.

Chapter 36

Nomathemba felt sexually deprived, negated and starved; a kind of depravity that humiliated any woman and shrunk her self-esteem. There seemed to be a witness to her depravity and negation, the Neolithic figurine. The archaic sculpture stood on the headboard, a headless first-rate witness to her misery.

She didn't tell Binga the whole truth about the prehistoric figure, except that it was a souvenir from Britain. She couldn't have told him an intimate friend stole the artefact from the archives of the British Institute of Archaeology in London, and that the so-called friend was actually a male bed partner of hers abroad. *Bed partner* was indeed the term, she later accepted; there was no emotional bond between her and Roderick Morris twice her age at the time. Roderick was an obese assistant archaeologist. He and she were virtually tools of convenience to each other. In the UK, people didn't speak about sex in whispers, as was the case in Africa. The free society had red-light districts and strings of retail shops for sex accessories.

Two things hooked her ruthlessly to the forty-year old bachelor. Foremost he understood foreplay; secondly, he knew where to touch a woman. In his arms, she felt edible. His lips explored every square inch of her skin.

Roderick claimed the figurine was a priceless artefact from an ancient civilisation. He believed prehistoric societies bowed to women and worshipped their femininity, at least as a recognisable source of life. He marvelled at her wide hips and bulbous fundament. Roderick nearly convinced her she was a sex goddess. The statuette became a constant reminder she was more than a human being to him. Love splashed with open veneration heightened a woman's self-esteem. In his arms and under the gaze of his crystal-blue eyes, he charmed her like the feminine Goddess of ancient civilisations, telling

her she represented the goddesses of that ancestral world. Roderick added a spiritual perspective to the way she regarded herself.

Often she would get carried away and suppose Roderick was on the verge of proposing marriage to her; especially when he envisioned the future with her and was ever expressing his wish to be in her arms all the time, the only hindrance being that he had known her for a few weeks. When she asked him if he wasn't merely lusting over her, he said love was indisputably founded on lust, the two being cousins. On every encounter, he showered her with praises, of her African figure, the narrow waistline and flaring fundament, of her deep voice, of her gyrating in bed, of the spectacular protuberances in her vineyard. With time, she discovered most men promised what they couldn't deliver when lost in the throes of sexual pleasure. After all, she was still youthful and had much to learn.

Roderick Morris' stint in her life was erotic, spiritual and brief. He suffered a heart attack two months after meeting her. The cardiac arrest trigger, he stumbled on her in a three-man orgy in her bedroom. The figurine, now her erotic talisman, was on the headboard somewhat overseeing everything. When Roderick stepped in and slumped to the floor, the men called an ambulance and administered him first aid. When the ambulance crew arrived, paramedics connected him to a cardio-resuscitation machine, clamped an oxygen respirator on his face and whisked him away on a stretcher.

She visited him at a private hospital the following morning intending to give him hope he would make it and to apologise. When she walked into his ward, she was shocked to find a mortuary attendant loading his death-cloth-wrapped body onto a special two-wheeled cart. The only Londoner who cherished her enough to probe every orifice in her body with his tongue was dead. She quietly walked backwards, exited the ward and left the hospital. A condemning voice within her argued her insatiability led to the death of the archaeologist. That Roderick Morris' blood was on her hands.

At twenty years old, Nomathemba found herself an emigrant worker in London. For nearly three years, she was a part-time waitress at a plush restaurant above King's Cross subway station. Abroad, feeling she had never mattered to her husband, she tried to purge her mind of Binga Jochoma and the paramilitary police. Because she wanted to occupy herself, sizeable male traffic came in her life; groupies, orgiastic characters, reserved men, gangsters and downright experimentalists bent on exploring every orifice in a woman.

In London, the commercial capital of the world, she had never lacked the desire of her heart: men a little on the pervert side, men mad enough to pleasure her until she was on the brink of passing out. These men were rough, primeval and believed in open competition, deriving thrills from queuing and taking her in turns. When the excitement overwhelmed them, they took her in two-, three- and foursomes.

Orgies lit her life and rejuvenated her spirit. She missed the odour of excited masculine bodies, the bulldog sexuality borne from direct competition when each man strove to outdo the other. The indulgence took her over the passionate shoals of time to the beginning of history when men hunted and gathered and fought fiercely for women.

As she lay in bed, she thought of Binga Jochoma, her wedded husband, how he had failed her with his absence and insensitivity. He was never there for her. All he had done was reduce her to picking up cabdrivers, some of whom stood her on her head and pounded her until she fell exhausted in a heap. Even if he had been there for her, the stamina, dominance, libido, intelligence and perverseness she craved, nature hadn't endowed a single man with all of them.

Now at thirty years old, what was she in the entire human enterprise? The question demanded an honest answer. Several came. She was a secondary school teacher born in the wrong aeon and on the wrong continent. She was a hapless woman, one of many in the

world, whom God, the living-dead and gods had forgotten. By definition, she was married, yet practically single.

Nomathemba reached for a hand mirror on a bedside table and looked at her facial image. The absence of human ganglia, carefree men of obstinate endurance, stalked her. She was lonely in an overpopulated city. The lines on her face were deepening. She looked much older than her age, the toll of sadness and sexual deprivation. God forbid, she was a mere thirty. Fingering her face, she blamed her husband for the fortyish appearance. Tonight she wouldn't starve herself. She slid a hand into her panties. Roused, she climbed out of bed and looked at her full image in a wall mirror, wriggling out of her panties.

Despite her tubular breasts hanging like the fruit of the sausage tree, triceps hanging like jowls and a distended, sagging belly, she thought she was still desirable. Her hips were wide, her legs svelte, almost petite and tapering shapely. A golden ring hung from her navel. Manicured pubic hair, a thin vertical strip like a Hitler moustache, and folds of loose flesh, always a handful in a man's fist, graced her womanhood.

More jewellery decorated her loins. On the apex was another ring, also golden but smaller. Three silvery studs were in each of her jowls, vertical and parallel, shrine decorum in formation in a revered place of worship. When men entered her vineyard, they abandoned their reservation, cried, moaned and praised her prowess. Men, especially Londoners, and Binga, were mesmerised by her tenderloin, the endowed catacomb to her being, the door to every woman's soul, she thought. When wet it was a grotto. No wonder some religious sects in India worshipped the vineyard, gazing at its images in deep meditation.

Fondling her breasts, reflecting on many Londoners who told her she had more than the gizmo of a woman, Nomathemba got lost in thought. London was a sexual melting pot. In Hertfordshire, she dealt cocaine as a little paid courier and comfort girl for the Italian

Mafia. When the organisation gave her back her life after about two years of service and dependence on amphetamines, she went through harrowing therapies including hypo-desensitization, gulping nausea-causing megavitamins, electro-sleep and shooting barbiturates between her toes.

Then an Irish boyfriend took mercy on her and recommended her to one Dr Loebbe Silvanus, a middle-aged top-notch Canadian psychologist practising in London. In his private consultation chambers in the heart of London, the psychologist had several sessions with her lying coily on the chintz of a Spartan couch while he sat in a chair listening to recollections of her girlhood. She gave him accounts of growing up poor in Tshabalala, a ghetto-like high-density suburb, a hive of crime and prostitution. He guided her to talk about how and when she became cognisant of her sexuality. The doctor spoke to her in a warm, soothing voice, his eyes always on her, which she took as a personal involvement and found his unwavering attention stimulating.

To ensnare him, she wore see-through dresses, leggings and mini-skirts to the sessions, and was happy to see his eyes straying to her legs and bosom. Three sessions after her deliberate provocations, Dr Loebbe Silvanus wordlessly touched her breasts and squeezed them. She felt his crotch. That day they made love on the couch, the beads of the chintz singing, on his desk and on the carpet. While at it, he never stopped babbling of his two children, a son and daughter, five and eight years old respectively. Between gasps, he mentioned their names, and that his Catholic wife was too religious and obese to turn him on. As the doctor mourned his woes, she, being no expert at counselling, failed to hush him with her vague expressions of sympathy.

“I need sex more than air,” Dr Loebbe Silvanus told her.

“Do you believe in competition and a scramble for sex?”

His response was long in coming, “Competition is healthy and manly.”

She set a date and invited him to her flat in Hemel Hempstead along Maddox Road. At the appointed time, he knocked at her door. She received him into a lounge with three naked, giant Nigerians.

In the morning, about eight hours later, Dr Silvanus spoke to her when they were breakfasting with the other participants. “You’ve a schizophrenic temperament, latent, overpowering and bordering between an outright madness and the propulsions of an obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

“Is that a compliment, Doctor?”

“Craving orgiastic and sadistic intimacy is a manifestation of such temperament.”

“Is it a new finding or you’ve always known?”

The Canadian grinned. “It’s probably a result of unresolved psychic conflicts you suffered in your formative years, or a direct result of possible paedophilic abuses.”

The diagnosis, unsolicited as it were, coming after an all-night foursome orgy in which the psychologist was an outstanding participant, annoyed her. “Either you wish to dominate the Nigerians with your knowledge or you’ve a smart way of thanking me for the time of your life.” She gestured at the door. “Now get out!”

She missed carefree London, its populace of African emigrants, the city’s strip-tease clubs, the Canadian doctor and the three Nigerians.

Her cell phone rang. The LCD displayed the date as December 6, the hour as 20:05 and the caller as ‘*Private no*’.

“Hello, Private-Caller,” she said into the hand piece, remotely but pleasantly hoping it was her husband.

“Hello, Emilia,” the voice of the caller came, masculine and exotic, a familiar voice with a strange slur.

An erotic sigh escaped from her.

“It’s Nicolson here.”

"I can tell, Nicolson!" she shouted with childish excitement. "Of all the people, the last one I expected to hear from! What a fabulous surprise! It's good to hear your voice again!"

"I landed in the afternoon. Tell me you missed me. How're you doing?"

"I'm trying to cope. I missed you too."

"It's good to be back in Africa. I was wondering if I could see you tomorrow."

"Where're you, Nicolson?"

"The usual hotel. Room 110."

"What're you promising me?"

"Pretty much everything your mom told you not to do. I promise you Paradise. Tomorrow you'll enter Heaven unless you're immortal. Between now and the time we meet, I must prepare a number of things."

She laughed. "What's the dress code?"

"Strictly no underpants, Emilia."

She laughed again. "Any rules, my boar bull?"

"No holds-barred, Emilia."

"I pray you've the libido of a dozen escaped prisoners."

"I'm loaded with the passion of a college of cardinals, that's my promise."

"Good boy. Expect me tomorrow at 9 pm."

To him she was Emilia. To her he was simply Nicolson, most likely a pseudonym, she suspected. From the way he looked at boys, she suspected he was a pederast, perhaps a Roman cardinal on vocation. About his life, he spoke very little as if he was an upstart without a family or history. Intertwined and copulating, she mused, they were N-squared. He was expert at stimulating her to the point of insanity. The man delighted in peering into her eyes.

She met the American, no, the alleged American, two years ago in a hotel bar in Bulawayo. There were chances Nicolson was Scandinavian, Belgian or Italian or even Norwegian, she wasn't

expert at distinguishing accents. The manner he pronounced English words was strange. From his nasal and eccentric way of pronouncing words, definitely he was neither British nor American. One evening when they were in the throes of a sadomasochistic romp, and she was bound helplessly to a bed, he had used a syringe to draw blood from her wrist and squeezed it into a small laboratory bottle, joking he was a vampire and he would drink it when he was alone. He put the bottle in his bag, she remembered.

Nicolson said he was a tourist from Michigan, by trade a sculptor. He told her he was in the country to visit the Victoria Falls for inspiration. This he said an hour after meeting her, when he was a spent cartridge beside her on his hotel bed, and she was spread-eagled, helplessly and painfully handcuffed to the headboard and strapped to the rear legs of the bed. She had felt like a warthog dressed for barbecue, but with him seemingly possessed and slapping her everywhere, she had enjoyed every second of it.

The next day, with her taking a risk, he took her in a taxi to Joshua Mqabuko Airport. They flew to the Victoria Falls. For three days, they “honeymooned” to the chagrin of tourists in the resort town. Holidaymakers couldn’t stand their vivacious kissing. A team of Chinese tourist stumbled on them naked and noisily making love in the “Rain Forest.” Twice on the last day, the authorities searched for them in the thickets of the “Rain Forest” and reminded them the tourist attraction wasn’t a garden for nudists and sexual indecency, strongly warning them public sex was unlawful in Zimbabwe.

Now Nicolson, the doyen of sexual overindulgence, had just called. He said he was in Bulawayo. Nothing would delay her from meeting the macho man. An elated Nomathemba put the cell phone down beside the hand mirror. Tomorrow night promised to be memorable. Nicolson had come and called her at a time when she was feeling like expiring beneath an ox-like man. Clandestinely, she was his to love and to hold, and if he could and proposed, take her

with him back to his country. She wished her husband wouldn't return in the coming days.

Reflecting on their moonlighting affair, it dampened her Nicolson had never pronounced his love. All he said, which was close to that effect, was that she was sweet and had the potential to turn every head in the United States of America. Whether he lied to her or meant it, the words gave her elation. Nicolson wasn't like her husband, a reticent man who never appreciated her beauty, giving her the impression he saw her as a mannequin he mounted mechanically when the urge was on him. Though the foreigner had never said he loved her, he was tenfold more delightful than Binga.

As she mentally went through her wardrobe for rousing clothes to wear the following day, she was acquainted with an indisputable truth. Though she was married to Binga Jochoma, she would always be available to other men for as long as her husband treated her like a domestic worker.

Chapter 37

At noon on 7 December, Matipa emerged from her house in the middle of household chores, now a vain preoccupation in a bid to forget about Bomani Kumanda and the worst that could've happened to her son. She was washing dishes beside the house when she looked up and saw a figure in stripped hospital garbs approaching the compound.

Many people left whatever they were doing and watched the figure, a man who kept turning stiffly as if to check his bearings, like one lost. He walked as though his limbs were in plasters. Had *Madzibaba* Remegio resurrected demented from the dead, or was it by error the rumour of the teenager's death had reached the compound when he was actually recuperating in hospital?

The figure got closer, a man struggling to walk upright and in one direction. From his bearing and gaiety, she saw she had erred by supposing it was Remegio. The approaching man was Mr Evans Emedhi. Like many people, she stared at him from her doorway, a safety precaution. Apparently, illness or shock had stricken the man.

"What in the name of God am I seeing?" Matipa whispered to herself horror-struck.

In stripped hospital garbs and barefoot, Emedhi was an unbelievable sight. Many people stood outside their dwellings and looked at him aghast. Matipa heard a male neighbour remarking he looked like an insane vagrant. She scrutinised him from the distance. His hair was tousled. When he turned to look over his shoulder, she saw an adhesive bandage on the back of his head. The office orderly-cum-errands man didn't seem to recognise anyone, which was strange and disturbing.

Matipa thought Emedhi's first port of call would be the mill manager's office, to report to Mr Gilchrist Keneas, the man who sent him to the hospital. Emedhi shuffled to his residence and vanished

into his sitting-cum-cooking hut. When he entered, his wife, three children and grandchildren yelled and scurried out for safety. Stembile and the children peered cautiously at him through the open door. A lasher who lived next to the Emedhis ran in the direction of the office.

Matipa kept staring, trying to make sense of the strange development. Around Emedhi, many witnesses of the anomaly were in shock and shaking their heads. Perhaps the orderly was saying unsettling things. What happened to him in the past two days?

At first, Matipa watched indoors Emedhi's sleeping hut. However, when it struck her her husband was indisputably the author of Remegio's immolation and Emedhi's returning stricken, she was obliged to champion consoling Emedhi's family despite her own grief. She also had to be in the forefront of figuring out what befell the office orderly. It was common knowledge he had gone to Kadoma by commuter omnibus two days ago on 5 December after Mr Keneas asked him to visit Remegio on his behalf.

Matipa and about a dozen baffled sympathizers converged at Emedhi's sitting hut to learn first-hand of his predicament and possibly render assistance. They stood behind the man's family and peered into the hut. Mr Evans Emedhi sat still on a low wooden stool staring blankly outside. Everyone was mystified.

"What happened to you?" Stembile solicited. "I'm your wife. Don't you recognise me?"

The orderly remained motionless.

"Talk to us," a man said. "We need to help you. What happened in Kadoma? Why're you in hospital clothes?"

Emedhi made no sign of comprehension, neither did he look at the speaker nor scan the faces of his bewildered spectators.

"The grandchildren are afraid," Stembile coerced. "Say something for their sake. Were you involved in a car accident?"

Matipa noticed that Emedhi stared without blinking and his breathing was heavy and rhythmic. In that posture and motionless,

she took it his inactivity was that of a catastrophe reposing. She was ready to flee should he rise from the stool.

“A powerful diviner must be fetched immediately,” another man suggested. “This doesn’t look good.”

Mr Keneas arrived at the hut to verify for himself, a pistol visibly tucked in his trousers. The weapon gave Matipa some assurance of security. People cleared way for the mill manager to enter the hut. Everyone expected the manager to force his subordinate to talk, but the manager stopped abruptly at the door, his lower jaw dropping.

“What’s it, Evans?” he demanded. “What happened? Are you drugged?”

The orderly remained mute and inert, apart from his heavy breathing.

“Did he speak to anyone?” Mr Keneas asked, turning to the people around him.

The onlookers shook their heads.

Fruitlessly, he spent the next ten minutes questioning the orderly until he turned to Stembile. “Did he speak to you, Mrs Emedhi?”

She shrugged and shook her head.

“Is there anyone who can explain this?” the coloured man asked to no avail. “Watch him then,” he said finally. “I’m going to the hospital to find out what happened and why they discharged him in such a bad shape.” With those words, Mr Keneas trotted out of the compound towards the office building. His jeep roared out of the mine soon after.

Sympathizers took turns to coerce Emedhi into talking. An hour passed, but no one had the ability to draw the man from the obscure world he had entered.

Stembile crossed to their sleeping hut and vanished into it for a couple of minutes. She emerged with a handful of semi-ground herbs, which she took into their cooking hut and came out with the herbs smouldering on red embers in a battered frying pan. After a slight hesitation, she entered the hut in which Emedhi sat. Matipa

was convinced the burning herbs would rouse the orderly from his hypnotic trance. Asphyxiating fumes filled the room and drifted outside.

“Leave him alone, you shameless Barotse devils!” Stembile shouted on top of her voice. “Wicked spirit, I order you out of him! Find another abode! I send you back to your master now! Return to the sods of Zambia! If you try to resist, I’ll dispatch you to the barren fells of a scorching desert! Leave him now, mean devil!”

The shouting and the fumes changed nothing. After several minutes, Stembile began to cough uncontrollably. Gasping for air, she exited with the laden pan.

Matipa tried to make sense of it all, starting with Emedhi’s lonesome arrival, dusty and leg-weary. Though Mr Keneas said he had given him bus fare and money for refreshments during the trip, it was clear from the dust on him he had walked the twenty-two kilometres from Kadoma. He was noticeably stiff, literally mute and staring, zombie-like. The compound was unsettled. As it were, speculation was rife Emedhi had contracted some unknown disease at the hospital, a referral medical centre for all smaller hospitals and clinics in the districts of Kadoma and Gokwe South. Matipa returned to her house to watch the obscurity from its safety, so did many people. Emedhi’s family stayed outside, the brunt of the mystery staring at them.

Late in the afternoon, the mill manager’s jeep roared back into the compound and manoeuvred around dwellings to the Chipendos residence in a far corner of the compound. Many eyes followed him as he disembarked and Boniface Chipendo, Remegio’s father, met him. The two conversed briefly until Chipendo led him into their sitting-cum-cooking hut. Mr Keneas walked with his head bowed, his hands clasped respectively, which was very unlike him. Minutes passed. The mill manager exited alone, his bearing as depressed as before. He climbed into his car and drove to the residence of the Emedhi’s.

Matipa and many people gathered around his vehicle expectantly. Mr Keneas stepped out. He wore a long face and obviously bore depressing news.

“Remegio is dead,” announced the mill manager.

The confirmation hit Matipa with the onslaught of hail. Despite her factual conclusion, the teenager wouldn’t survive the burns, the announcement of his death saddened her as if it had been a remote possibility. Mutely, she mourned his passage in his youth without leaving a child for the posterity of his family line. She reckoned the school dropout had died loathsome of a god who failed to protect his sheep when he faced the wrath of the prophesied demon. Logically, if at all a touch of sanity remained in him after the attack, Remegio must have seen his blunder in bowing and committing himself to a pagan god Jatropa communicated with and saw.

“He died two days ago when Emedhi visited him,” the manager went on. “I’ve just broken the sad news to his father and stepmother.”

A murmur of sadness rippled in the throng.

“Mr Chipendo told me he disowned his son when he dropped out of school,” continued the manager. “He won’t have anything to do with Remegio’s body or its burial. He said the apostolic sect and Jatropa should handle their mess or he would take matters into his own hands and avenge his son. Do we’ve elders of the apostolic faith here?”

Everyone looked about and heads shook.

Mr Keneas continued, “The teenager caused commotion, destroyed expensive equipment and injured hospital staff before Emedhi’s arrival. Mr Emedhi had a brief scuffle with Remegio. Not long after, the teenager died from complications arising from extensive second and third degree burns.”

“What are second and third degree burns?” a man asked.

“Serious burns,” replied Mr Keneas. “Most of his skin was burnt limiting places the doctors could cut skin for grafting. Apart from

that, the country has no special doctors for skin grafting. Doctors gave Remegio a four percent chance of survival.”

Everything was gloomy. Nothing eased the intrigue.

“But now we need to take Mr Emedhi back to the hospital.” He suddenly appealed to the people. “The poor man is in terrible pain. Let me explain.” He told them hospital authorities informed him Remegio’s death was from cardio-vascular and other secondary complications arising from the burns. The teenager became very violent immediately before he died, which the authorities explained as an acute case of hallucination, perchance his way of reacting to some drugs or, from another perspective, his peculiar manner of manifesting post-traumatic stress. About stiff and staring Emedhi, Mr Keneas said, “A Cuban consultant doctor at the hospital seemed the only one who could provide some semblance of explanation of what struck Mr Emedhi. The Cuban suspected Emedhi was in a state of prolonged shock following a brief fracas with Remegio in the Burns Unit. The consultant feared something triggered a dormant disorder in the old man’s body whose muscles, tendons and ligaments are gradually ossifying.”

“What does ossifying mean?” someone asked.

“It’s a medical term which means his muscles, ligaments and tendons are turning into bone and consequently constraining his movements and impairing his ability to speak. The Cuban consultant speculated that fear or an agent yet to be identified triggered the sudden ossification at the hospital.” Mr Keneas fished a paper from a hip pocket on which he had scribbled something, a term he had difficulties pronouncing. Reading it, he said, “The disorder is called Muenchmeyer Syndrome or *Fibrodysplasia Ossifacans Progressiva*.”

The listeners shook their heads at the lengthy medical jargon.

Mr Keneas continued, reiterating the Cuban doctor said the condition was one of the rarest genetic disorders in the world. “However, the expert at the hospital couldn’t say with certainty if it was the Muenchmeyer Syndrome. The hospital detained Emedhi

when he collapsed in the Burns Unit, but when he gained consciousness he was stiff, speechless and feverish. X-ray pictures revealed he didn't suffer a concussion. The consultant wanted to continue detaining him in order to verify the suspected disorder with foreign laboratories, but Mr Emedhi sneaked out of the hospital this morning."

Everything sounded like a cock-and-bull story to Matipa, but there just was no reason for the mill manager to fabricate such an elaborate story and go the extra length of inventing the complicated medical terms. She chose not to dispute that Mr Keneas drove to the hospital where authorities and a Cuban doctor at the institute furnished him with the shocking information. The reality of the matter was that the man Jatropa prophesied would split heads open was becoming redundant. The charlatan's spirits had lied.

If Matipa understood the mill manager, Evans Emedhi was turning into stone. Everything was absurd. Could human flesh change overnight into bone? She and the other sympathisers listened in disbelief, conscious Emedhi's condition was beyond science and medicine, and Mr Keneas was too western to look beyond the preposterous explanation. He was a coloured man brought up in a western context in Glen Lorne, a plush northern suburb of Harare. It didn't make sense that muscles, tendons and ligaments could ossify suddenly. At first, Matipa chose to think she was in yet another realistic nightmare, but it wasn't, being yet another occurrence as intricate as the sad events on the day of the kidnapping.

Some elders in the compound sadly remarked that either rigor mortis was prematurely upon Emedhi or he had been bewitched, invisible spirits and goblins were weighing him down.

Matipa resented Jatropa the more. Apart from Bomani Kumanda, Jatropa was the worst thing that ever happened to Sakis Mine and the surrounding communities. Because he had vainly called God's name, breaching a holy commandant wretched in stone, he had vilified God's hallowedness and provoked the Almighty to resign

him to the Devil. Satan, cunning and thorough, was in the wind, rain, sun and the cold to have his toll on Jatropha's nakedness and kill him slowly. There was an explanation for everything in the Heavens, she believed, but now there was no genuine interface between man and God to shed light. All was carnality built on carnality rooted in demonic foundations.

In conclusion, Mr Keneas said, "Though Emedhi is quiet, he's in untold pain. He needs doses of morphine three times a day to relieve him of the pain in his stiffening joints. It isn't easy for him to breathe either. Extra bone is forming around his ribcage. Mr Emedhi is wanted at the hospital."

"What're we supposed to do?" a seemingly all-weather loyalist asked.

"Help me carry him into the vehicle."

One by one, people dispersed. No one dared lay their hands on Emedhi afraid they could contract the disorder or suffer the same consequence. Matipa left too in a huff, one of many convinced the problem was spiritual. It was a pity Prophet Jatropha was amok; he could've been of assistance though he was demonic. Her feeling was that something terrible was brewing.

Chapter 38

In the space of two martinis, Gillian was already babbling about her futuristic dreams of proprietorship of an international news company headquartered in London or New York, and someday becoming a cabinet minister. Overtly ambitious, she spoke of the future with a fervent determination as if Binga was the future incarnate guidable by her words and earnest aspirations. Binga saw that she was getting tipsier by the minute, being someone not used to regular drinking. He wished alcohol would inhibit all her reservations, to allow an erotic atmosphere to hover and settle.

Nursing a glass of Coca Cola, he studied her across a table in a corner, mesmerised by how suddenly she had sunk into him in the past seven days ever since he arrived at their house in Seke in Chitungwiza. The more she talked about herself, the more he learnt she was an advocate of feminine empowerment. The place was the exquisite Bronte Garden Hotel in the Avenues Suburb of Harare. The exact location, the dining quarter of a coy suite sombre with African ethnic decor; wooden effigies and artistic ancient weapons pasted on the walls. The hour was 8:10 pm.

Akon, the Senegalese's romantic music, played continuous on a portable CD player Binga bought that afternoon in preparation for the evening. Candlelit and decorated, an assigned waiter walking in and bowing slightly on presenting them with the cuisines and drinks they ordered, the atmosphere was a romantic, miniscule heaven.

"I'm yours forever, sweetie," she suddenly said. "If you could get into my heart you'd see how deep I'm into you."

"How deep are you into me? Be honest."

"You're now the blood that flows in my veins." She thought for a while. "If you were to ditch me, I'd fizzle and die, that's the truth, so help me God."

Both laughed. Her laughter was coy and unrestricted. All the while, his eyes were on her exposed bosom cleavage, torturously fascinating him. It took him great effort to restrain himself from extending his hands and touching her breasts, shapely pears pointing at him behind a silken dress that left her arms and shoulders bare. Having impressed it on him that hers was an impeccable life of chastity; he took it that she was virginal. Though a yearning to strip her naked and force himself on her tormented him, outwardly he had to be as cool as custard, which was gentlemanly, exactly what he guessed she expected of him. He saw her as a helpless duckling alone with a wolf in an elegantly tailored navy-blue serge suit.

“You’re romantic. All the men I dated were blockheads. I’ve always wanted to date an intelligent and authoritative man, an unshakeable guy I’d feel at peace and safe with.”

“Am I the guy of your dreams, Gillian?”

“Absolutely, Ralph. I’ve always wanted a strong guy who tells me what to do.”

“Most women aren’t so honest.”

“God designed men to be domineering, and I find domineering very stimulating.”

She was twenty-one, in matters romantic inexperienced, and supposed he was twenty-seven, his name Ralph, single and an operative of the Central Intelligence Organisation. Love and danger brought a pleasurable dimension to a relationship, but the heart wasn’t an organ of logic. It would take her next to forever to realise she was courting death; he ruminated to himself.

She seemed one of many teenagers and young women who based their lives and made decisions on the themes of romantic novels without threads of reality in them—stories of ordinary women falling in love with surgeons, fighter pilots and army generals, and living happily ever after, bookish nonsense. If she knew villains murdered the innocent, and fate rewarded murderers and dictators, shunning moralising issues by rewarding virtue and punishing vice, she would

be naturally sceptical, questioning and verifying all things before making decisions. That way she wouldn't have dangerously isolated herself with a killer in the name of romance.

Though outwardly she tried to be composed, he knew she was afire; an affair with an authoritative, well-to-do and perceivably dangerous man always tantalised a young woman. Having gained the confidence of her parents and relatives, and footed an enormous bill at the funeral, he was now more of a fiancé than anything else. When they left for the hotel in the rental Toyota Hilux double-cab, which she understood C.I.O allocated to him, her father and mother had proudly waved at them. He was the family's undisputable man of the year.

She ordered tasty Italian dishes, arugula salad, spaghetti al *cartoccio*, veal *piccata*, steaming antipasto, gammon, caviar and champagne and others both of them couldn't pronounce. With Bolognese spaghetti as the main course, he enjoyed Greek peppered salad, Moroccan lamb meatballs, chicken Jalfrezi, brinjals in coconut sauce and prawn curry for lasting virility. Having partaken of a melt-in-the-mouth venison casserole, steeped imported tender deer meat in red wine studded with potatoes, swede, turnip and roasted vegetables; he was almost full.

As he sipped Coca Cola listening to her, the scourge of many personalities was his constant companion. He lived in many worlds. Matipa, Peza and Sakis Mine were a world. So was Nomathemba. The prowl on the Shurugwi-Kadoma goldfield and its deadly vaults, manmade catacombs rife with brutal gangs and gangsters, was yet another world. The dead children he named after torrential rivers, Nyanyadzi and Rusitu, were another world. Bulawayo, the forgotten and faded City of Kings, represented another realm to him.

The dead children lingered in his head. Like all rivers, the children had failed to be containable and had vanished. Only time and he knew that rivers eventually vanished. Time destroyed and healed all things. The children had flowed to the ancestors and

heaven, not to the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean. All rivers ended in heaven, science alluded to it. Like all rivers, someday Nyanyadzi and Rusitu would flow back into his life. Perhaps Gillian was the vessel for their re-entry into the world. Matipa had told him how biblical Job lost all his children and wealth, and how God had restored everything manifold.

Unfortunately, on this day, 7 December, he couldn't see himself anymore on the threshold of a world of wealth and glamorous girls clad in bikinis. He couldn't foresee himself wearing a genuine Rolex wristwatch, extravagantly playing roulette and smoking Havana cigars in the company of millionaires. Envisaging himself speeding aimlessly in a Lamborghini and Mercedes Benz convertible on the expressways of America and Europe was now a faded dream. Before arriving at the Gadaga's house, he had rightly felt like one about to step into a world of massive investments on the local equity and international markets. It was now impossible to foresee himself basking on the Hawaiian beach. With misgiving, his mind wandered to the Louvre. The museum was yet another world housing a masterpiece, which should've been his springboard to yet another world. When he looked back at the past week, he saw he had been foolish enough to let love manipulate him. A dubious smile as sly as that of the *Mona Lisa* crossed his lips.

"You seem to be smiling, Ralph. What's it?"

"I'm smiling at you, my love. Don't find it strange, sweetheart."

When Gillian smiled back at him, she reminded him of a female DRC rebel he bayoneted in the chest near Lake Mweru. Despite himself, despondent reflections of the DRC war vexed him shortly. He wished he could obliterate the recollections of his tour of duty in the equatorial country, the emblazoned images of the so-called rebels and sell-outs, probably innocent Congolese and Rwandese forcibly conscripted.

The army had taught him war was a conflict of interest settled by means of bloodshed, and nothing else distinguished it from other

conflicts, a definition by Clausewitz, war's most celebrated theorist and at one time a director of the Prussian War College. As it was, Gillian was now his enemy.

"The blinds are open," Gillian said. She rose and crossed to the wall.

Watching her in an almost condom-tight floral dress of miniscule cut, short enough to expose nearly the full length of her schoolgirl-like legs, and low enough to exhibit a firm bosom with globular swellings parted by a deep-cleft demanding exploration, his eyes reddened. She went about pulling the blinds down, her movements methodical, her demeanour sensational.

He was close to drooling. Surely, if need be, he could've parted with a prowler's entire earnings just to see the rest of her body, and feel it inch by inch. He desired her that moment, yet he remained composed. Seated, smiling and facing him, she emptied the remains of her Martini in a gulp and went on to praise him unwarrantedly.

He chose to be honest with himself. He loved her totally and irrevocably. However, an ambivalent voice checked him. He was a murderer, heartless by disposition. A man with no heart couldn't love. No, what he felt within him was lust founded on a primeval instinct to ravage. She wasn't extraordinarily intelligent or beautiful, but it was the incandescence of her youth ravishing him. To love was one thing, to be sexually tortured another. Love and ravishing lay on different poles.

What would stop him from taking her now with or without her consent? No bell would toll as a cue to take her, and he wasn't genteel. The hour was drawing to 8:30 pm. Soon she was going to yawn, thank him for an outstanding romantic evening and suggest driving back to Chitungwiza in the rental car.

"Excuse me, Gillian," he said, rising, went to the music player and pressed some buttons. The hangman's tune, *Twin Peaks*, began playing. The saccharine and sentimental soundtrack was a monumental accompaniment to numerous horrific movies. A

saxophone wailed over bland chords and abrupt sounds of violins. The music rose and tumbled down to its original motif, a creepy agency conjuring a sense of metaphysical terror. On returning to the table, he noticed she was goggle-eyed with fear, the exact thing he had wanted to instil in her. "How do you like the music... romantic?"

"It's creepy, Ralph. Akon was fine, or you could play P-Square if you've them." She forced a smile. "Or you could get local and play Winky D or Maroja."

He rose and crossed to her. "My idea of romance is a rush of adrenalin." The statement was ironical, but he guessed she thought he was play-acting, like a teenager out on his first date and reciting preposterous sentences from obscure literature. He placed a hand on her bare shoulder. "Will you dance with me, Gillian?"

She glanced at her wristwatch. "It's too late for all that, Ralph. We must leave now or my parents will be worried. I don't want to disappoint them."

"Your parents know you're in safe hands, or don't they?"

"Of course, dear, but if we arrive late into the night, next time they won't let me come with you. I'm still in their custody."

"Home is only twenty minutes away by car. We won't dance till daybreak." His voice was warm, coaxing. "Just a token, sweetie, something we'd remember the night by. Please don't spoil the evening."

"If it were hip-hop or something contemporary I'd have danced with you."

He squeezed her shoulder, lightly. She looked at his hand weirdly, as though it were adulterating a cloistered nun, and then up at him. In her eyes, he still read fear.

As it was, he had spent a large amount on her and her family. If he wouldn't have things his way, he would be very disappointed, and whenever he lost temper, he became murderous. Fearing for her, he felt her slender neck, the vertebrae lumps sticking out from her nape, and the pulsating carotid arteries. He could break her neck

easily and go on to strangle her with his hands. The fractured vertebrae column was likely to sever the arteries. In less than two minutes, she would be comatose. In the next two, she would be dead from haemorrhaging and asphyxia.

Bending and smiling mildly to ease the tension creeping between them, he took both her hands in his and gently pulled her up, encountering little resistance.

“I’ll dance with you, Ralph, because you’ve insisted. This music is horrific. I don’t even know if we’re to waltz or something.”

“No, Gillian, We’ll kiss first and waltz later.” He could see she wanted to protest, ignorant defiance sealed her fate.

He drew her to him, their bodies clashing, and clamped his mouth around her lips. She wriggled in an attempt to break free, but his arms were around her, and his tongue was prodding, excitement swelling and surging in him the more. Her struggles subsided, an indication her initial reaction wasn’t genuine. Their mouths remained locked. Her breathing deepening, he felt her arms smooching his back, at first awkwardly, then in circles, like a Thai massage.

He carried her to the en suite bedroom. She grew limp by the second. Placing her on the bed and mounting her simultaneously, the kissing never abating, he fumbled with her dress, pulling the hem up. His hand came to rest at her groin. Her legs parted.

Her hands were on the buckle of his belt, then his zipper, and suddenly she was pulling down his trousers. With spittle dripping from the corners of their clasped mouths, the kiss became a yearning recklessness. The dress caught around her raised arms, while his trousers couldn’t slide beyond his knees. They let go of each other and hastily defrocked themselves as if the cloths were on fire. He started with the shoes, then the jacket, shirt and trousers, which he cast blindly on the carpeted floor.

When he looked at her, she was nude except for a red G-string. She was irrevocably perfect for him, a doubtless *pas de deux*. Her groin was an undeniable summons. She was wincing, shaking and moaning

with desire. He fell on her, a hand roaming her upper body and coming to rest on her left nipple, only for a while, and then descending to her groin and sliding into the G-string. She moaned, ego abandoned and forgotten.

He didn't see how she did it, but the next second she was on top of him, her pursed lips brushing his neck, chest, and knotted abdomen until her face was level with his groin. Then she pulled down his mini-brief to his thighs. Both were panting.

"Take me, Ralph," she moaned quietly. "Take me now."

"What about protection?"

"Oh." She held her mouth, dismounted and crossed to her purse beside the CD player, from which she drew two packets of condoms. She placed one of the packets on the headboard and hastily opened the other. It had three condoms. With her teeth, she ripped open one, threw the other two on the bed and squatted beside Binga, sheathing him. She resumed her position on top of him.

"I love you," she whispered. "You'll come when I tell you to."

He felt like saying something romantic in response, but words failed him; this wasn't his province. To bridge the silence that ensued, he grunted, the sound predatory. She guided him into her, circumventing the scant fabric drawn aside. He braced himself in anticipation of devouring her honour, but to his astonishment, he slid into her like a red-hot branding tong into a mound of melting margarine. His desire tumbled with an arpeggio in the music. His manhood was a wink in Lake Tanganyika.

Oh, he had been foolish to expect such a wide-eyed beauty to be virginal. Virginity in a trendy, twenty-one year old undergraduate, most of the time loose foot in a city of libidinous executives was a scarce commodity. He guessed she had endured several backyard abortions. Even if he had found her pure in flesh, given her erotic capabilities and audacity, he would still doubt the authenticity of her virginity. Because of juju masters, virginity was now a perceivable illusion.

Binga's excitement vanished. "Let's do it some other time," he suggested, setting her beside him.

"I don't believe you." She was hurt and it sounded in her voice.

He couldn't tell her he hurt more than she did, and turned to face the wall. "If you could leave me alone for a while I would appreciate it."

"Don't tell me virginity means the world to you. Come out of the Stone Age, Ralph, for God's sake."

She shook his shoulder and tried to turn him, but he stiffened. He heard her climb from the bed. Pretending to fall asleep, he just stared at the wall not knowing how to suppress the rage and condemnation rising in him. Gillian ejected *Twin Peaks* for house music. She danced and sang along drunkenly until Binga fell asleep. When he woke up, a wall clock put the time at 11: 40 pm, and Gillian was dressed, tipsier and dancing to Shakira music blaring in the suite. Binga propped himself up on pillows and watched with disinterest as Gillian began to strip and samba-dance for him.

Though she was intoxicated and her routines were awkwardly amateurish, she was captivating enough to deplete his disinterest. She jerked and gyrated to the rhythm, now and then sucking a finger provocatively. The same finger frequently wriggled underneath the pubic fabric of her panties. Her unbridled pear-shaped breasts flared as she danced. Binga had the impression of a seasoned whore, outright brothel material.

Hours ago, she had harped on going home, reminding him that she was in her parent's custody. Was this the Gillian that had forged it in him she was as pure as a nun's nipple? Gillian was simply a young undergraduate steeped in fornication, a seasoned prostitute feigning decency and virtue.

He pondered his loss; tops were the Toshiba laptop he bought her and the expensive casket at the funeral. Then there were the four buses and the vintage hearse he hired for her uncle's funeral, a convicted criminal. At the funeral gathering, he had bought enough

chicken, biltong, pork ribs, sliced Scottish sausages to feed over a hundred people for two days. Did she know he had spent large amounts on her, the family and the funeral on the strength of a virginity that proved nonexistent hours ago?

Now he only had about twenty US dollars left. His mind was no longer in the suite. He missed Peza. In his mind he saw him dribbling and elbowing his way to a soccer goal post through defensive batteries of his peers, Matipa cheering, the compound mesmerised. The summit of the reverie was Peza receiving the FIFA World Cup on behalf of Zimbabwe's National Team, the Warriors. He would tell his son it was an achievable feat if he remained focused.

Gillian slid the waistband of her G-string to the middle of her thighs.

He hated her with a passion. She had ruined his future. Walking into the Grand Gallery of the Louvre Museum and laying his hands on the *Mona Lisa* were now a distant dream. The future assumed a dull hue. He thought of Matipa and Nomathemba. Unlike Gillian, they were desirably African. Matipa was norms and ethics incarnate, wholesome and enviable in manner and bearing. Nomathemba was a suspicious character, having spent nearly three years in the UK. The schoolteacher's fondness for perverted intimacy was outlandish. There were strong chances she was unfaithful.

He was bankrupt, he reflected, squarely facing his changed circumstances. How would he return home penniless, to either Bulawayo or Sakis Mine? He shouldn't have strayed to Harare. By preoccupying himself with a broken student, *gaba*, a discarded and useless empty food can, he had painfully skewed his future.

The shop at Muwuyweburi Business Centre in Chimanimani was no longer a thinkable venture. That he was entertaining a shameless whore at the expense of his son and wives piqued him. As it was, he had wasted over five thousand American dollars on strangers and the burial of a criminal. Returning home empty-handed wasn't prudent and his custom. Embarking on another prowling took

time. He had never been away for more than a month. The desire to see his son taxed him.

The thought of returning to Matipa and Peza empty-handed and penniless became a nightmare. Certainly, he would lose his worth as a father and husband. Matipa would see him as a failure, a lesser man. A father who returned home empty-handed after a long absence pauperised his family. The world was fraught with stories of well-meaning women who deserted unprofitable husbands. A woman who developed a low opinion of her husband denied him conjugal rights, it was an undocumented fact, and it was akin to rape for one to sleep with a woman one could neither dress nor feed.

Nuance by nuance, like a pitcher filling drop by drop with water, the thought of going home became a phobia. When he looked at Gillian images of a forfeited future surcharged in him. For the first time in his life, he looked at his sober tendencies with foreboding. If he drank, he could've spent the last few dollars on him on vodka or gin, and drunk himself into a stupor to escape the phobia, at least for some hours.

Facing reality and considering what was at his disposal, he reminded himself he was a killer. What other way existed for him to find recourse for his loss except to take the whore out of circulation? Many whores the world over were maimed or killed by their patrons. She was a pulp nerve that carried pain. From her death, there was nothing to gain except her absence.

Gillian continued to dance, all her movements now decadently lustful. He continued to stare at her, indecisive, but partially convinced he had to kill her. At one point, he had heard Matipa saying he who received a prophet received a prophet's gift or something to that effect. On the contrary, when he reasoned, the opposite also had to hold true. He who messed with a murderer received death.

However, he had to be cautious; at the funeral, especially during Requiem Mass, he had been too prominent as the resourceful man in

a dark suit, the stranger who sat among the closest relatives on the pew nearest to the casket. If he killed her now, or made her vanish, by virtue of being the last person her parents saw with her, he would be a prime suspect. For some time he could evade arrest, but there were fat chances someone who saw him in the cathedral would stumble on him someday and lead to his arrest.

Further than that, he didn't know what to think; Gillian's vulgar routines distracted his thoughts. She was on all fours, moving stealthily, her countenance cat-like, her buttocks raised, but she kindled no sparkle in him. Her parents crossed his mind: Mr and Mrs Mpayu Gadaga, a man and a woman of substance by appearance, yet they had raised a scumbag despite their university education. Could anything commendable come out of a school headed by a man who failed to impact values in his daughter, a man immoral to the extent of regarding his daughter as a sexual commodity? For footing an expensive funeral bill, they sold her to him. His eyes on her, he smiled at her parent's stupidity.

She took his smile as an expression of appreciation, and copulated more rising to her feet and slipping out of her under garment. Using her toe, she brought the G-string up, sniffed it and cast it on him. It landed on his face and slid to his bare chest.

Acting composed, he brought it to his nose and sniffed it too. He wore the panties like a beret, his ears protruding in the leg openings, and clapped his hands gentlemanly.

In his imagination, he placed her in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and saw her making news on CNN and BBC for the wrong reasons, a mob of men in skullcaps and women with veiled faces clamouring to stone her dead. If Amnesty International and the International Committee against Stoning and Execution jointly made enough noise, she was likely to escape stoning but she would be an outcast for the rest of her life. He saw her gaining entry on international Human Rights records.

Binga also placed her parents in the same country. The Islamic Panel Code wouldn't exonerate Mr and Mrs Mpayu Gadaga. Islamic Law would view the two as accomplices in Gillian's immorality, lash and banish them from the community. He refrained to consider how Islamic Law would regard him. If Allah was God the way he understood the Supreme Being, and this God wasn't happy with Gillian's scheduled execution, He had more than one way of preventing it. He envisioned himself as a sword in the hand of an Imam.

Gillian climbed onto the bed, stranding over him until he had a shark's view of her loins. She sank on his belly and adjusted her G-string on his head.

"Are you ready for me, Ralph?" she squeezed his chest.

He pointed at the clock. "I'm taking you home," he said, great effort calming his tone and voice. "I mustn't breach your father's trust. It's almost midnight."

"You mean we're driving at this hour?"

"Yes, Gillian. Jump into your clothes, dear. I don't want your parents reporting you missing."

"Come on, Ralph. They know you're with me."

"Are they used to your coming home after midnight?"

"I can't say so, but they know I'm with you."

"My heart says I should take you home. My heart is my master." His heart said he should take her life as punishment for changing the circumstances of his future. She didn't know the two things that bothered him, that she was a gutter through which his money had fallen, and that by bankrupting him she had negatively re-written his future. "Tomorrow is another day. We can spend it at the Shangri La Restaurant along Enterprise Road. Let's be going."

"Whatever you say, Ralph." She smiled, kissed him on the lips and dismounted from him.

As they dressed, he knew he was going to kill Gillian, but wondered where he would go from Harare. At Sakis Mine, he was

working for a pittance and Matipa was a hindrance to his beliefs. Ever since he married her, his life had ceased to be progressive. The proceeds from his prowls vanished as they had just done. He believed her Christian faith subdued his charms and spirits. Apart from a few commonplace household effects, he had no valuable property. They didn't deserve each other.

Would he then leave Matipa for Nomathemba? He didn't love his legitimate wife. She stuttered whenever she accounted for the three years she spent in Britain. When he imagined her in London, he saw her in the arms of various men, which sickened him. For the sake of serenity in his heart, it made sense to divorce her. Peza was the only person he felt had to be in his life. For him, he would return to the mine.

As he thought about his son, brainstorming possibilities of laying his hands on a sizeable amount to compensate for his loss, it occurred to him that he could recover about a quarter of the money he spent on the funeral. Though the amount wouldn't buy an air ticket to France, at least he would be able to bring Matipa and Peza money or groceries.

If self-reproach against robbing and mugging continued to vex him, he made up his mind that he would start life alone and afresh at an abandoned gold mine at the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border. Perhaps, he mused to himself; it was at this old claim where he would *dig, dig, dig, and dig*. How Binga Jochoma would recover part of his money was crystal-clear in his head. Darkness would aid him. What he intended to do was taboo and condemned by all tribes and peoples throughout the world, except the Aghori of India...

Prelude to Book II: In the Hangman's Shadow

Chapter 1

His brow puckered, Bomani Kumanda woke up in the night recalling his Catholic past. Recollections of Roman priests, archbishops and cardinals in their immaculate robes and skullcaps, the Vatican and its vaults, irritated him to the point of clenching his fists. Sentient he wasn't himself for over a decade now, he waited until his sight accustomed to the moonlight.

He was lying in a hovel pitched in a thicket. It was 7 December; eight days had passed since the day he took Peza hostage. Yawning, he rose and stepped completely naked out of the crude shelter, which looked like a nomadic shepherd's temporary refuge. Five other hovels similarly made from bundles of grass and multi-purpose plastic black sheets, together with his, surrounded a structure resembling a waist-high goat pen half the size of a ping-pong table.

The shelters, private quarters for each of his men, were low and open-ended on two sides. In them, each man slept and prayed to his ancestors and the gods of *Gule Wamkulu* for protection and immunity against arrest, and the arrival of Binga. The crudely garrisoned construction, a circular structure of thin sticks tied together with strips of bark to form a grass-thatched cage, held its sole captive, Peza. The hovels were in a circle with an approximate radius of seven metres. The camp in the thorny thicket was adjacent to thirteen graves.

Aside from the cries of nocturnal birds and crickets, the vicinity was quiet. Somewhere in the area, a sentinel was possibly watching him. Taking care to avoid outcrops and walking into thorny bushes, he crossed to the warren in the middle and looked down at the boy. Peza was motionless and snoring like his henchmen in their shelters.

Satisfied the bait was secure in his custody; Bomani returned to his hovel and lay on a blanket, his mood meditative. His spirits and gods had never failed him. It was a question of time before they brought Binga to him; otherwise, he would've to kill the boy and take his head to Sakis Mine as he had promised. When he pondered the capabilities of his spirits and gods, he ultimately focused on God, the apex of every spiritual matrix.

Yet he was extremely angry with God. When he thought of God, the Madonna, Jesus Christ, angels, and beautified saints, a burning charcoal glowed in his breast. God and His assembly of innumerable saints and legions of angels had failed him. He had banked his trust in the Lord, only to be humiliated, dejected and thrown out of His presence like a leper discovered in a synagogue.

Lying on the blanket sleepless, he reflected on his Catholic past, his haplessness and the canard of believing in God in the twenty-first century. The Bible needed rewriting, he ventured, especially where it stated God was the same yesterday, today and forever. Perhaps his anger was unreasonable because, after all, there were chances God had ceased to exist and the universe was freefalling to its destruction.

Bomani's life, beginning when he was in secondary school in rural Malawi, was a series of sad and unbelievable experiences. Now he was sure familiar spirits were in control everywhere, favouring those like him who recognised them. When he was a teenager afraid a curse had besieged him, he vainly set out to protect himself by converting to Protestant Christianity. Then he converted to what he deemed proper Christianity, Roman Catholicism. Fourteen years ago, by a streak of luck, he toured the Seven-hilled city at eighteen when he was a first-year seminarian at the St Joseph Catholic seminary in Thyolo, about fifty kilometres south of Blantyre in the Southern Province of Malawi.

The Vatican availed some funds to sponsor poor seminarians who wished to set their feet on the holy ground on which the relics of saints lay and God's representative on earth, the Pope, had his

throne and residency. After writing some tests and attending many panel interviews, Bomani Kumanda met the criterion and was despatched to Rome.

In Rome, he met a dozen other seminarians from poor countries. The touring would-be priests, all males, chatted excitedly about their countries, exchanged addresses, and contact numbers. They welcomed him with hugs, kisses and utterances of blessings. Some gave him sweets and biscuits. In the whole of Malawi including the Roman Catholic seminary, he hadn't known that kind of love and concern.

The group consisted of Brazilians, Argentines, an Aborigine, Indonesians and fellow Africans. The brothers were twelve, and he was the thirteenth—thirteen aspiring Catholic priests on a sponsored pilgrimage to the Vatican, the earthly seat of God. An open deck, full catering hired bus drove them around.

While they enjoyed different steaming foods with strange names, they breathed the fresh air of Rome, gaped at its plains and mountainous scenery and ogled at the grandiose of the architecture of its old buildings standing in unending contrast to skyscrapers. A tour guide in ancestral Roman military armour, saddles, a sword in a scabbard and a plumed helmet, pointed at buildings, street-corner fountains, and gigantic marble statues of men, horses and lions displaying genitalia, gusto and muscles, giving off the cuff lectures on their architects and sculptors. The names of Caesars and Popes took precedence. The guide talked about the Renaissance and Italy's unique architecture, the names Michelangelo Amerighi da Caravaggio, Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico, Leonardo da Vinci and many others punctuating his presentation.

Towards dusk, they cruised past the iridescent Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome as it lit and brightened the night-darkened waters of the Tiber River, casting the reflection of its glowing grandeur on it. At nightfall, the bus took them to a hotel near the magnificent ruins of a second century chateau. The guide emphasised they had to sleep and

get ready to see the Vatican and its living tourist attractions, the Cardinals, and if they were lucky, the Pope, the following day. Belching onion, salad cream and mushrooms, Bomani had gone to bed the words of the guide ringing in his head: “The best is yet to be seen, brothers.”

The next morning, after a scrumptious breakfast of percolated coffee, cracking hot sausages, oats, omelettes, bacon, deep-fried mozzarella cheese and whole-wheat bread, the bus set out for the Vatican. As the bus drove into the State, unique architecture stared at them from all directions. Ahead was vast St. Peter’s, the largest of all churches as it dwarfed and dominated the Vatican. To the right of St. Peter’s dome the guide pointed at the peaked-roof of the Sistine Chapel. St. Peter’s Square was a great open space framed with massive colonnades. The guide pointed at the papal apartments on the topmost floor of a storied building to their right. On the colonnades, nude statues stared down at them.

On alighting from the bus, two Cardinals from the Curia welcomed and handed them over to an official guide of the Vatican, an Italian middle-aged man in a sleek olive three-piece suit, beige necktie and matching shoes. The man bore himself stately.

“My name is Filippo,” the new guide introduced himself, “Brother Filippo.” He shook hands with all the brothers, slightly bowing and nodding his acquaintance of the individuals as he stared in each and everyone’s face and spoke with a pride surpassing whoever deemed themselves the proprietors of the buildings.

Bomani found the Italian’s palm as soft as organdie, and thought Filippo appraised him more than he did the others....



Basil Diki is traditionally a polemic dramatist and a stage director. He is the author of *SHROUDED BLESSINGS*, and *THE LORD OF ANOMY*, both published by Langaa. He also wrote *THE TRIBE OF GRAVES*, published elsewhere, all plays. *TWO HANGMEN, ONE SCAFFOLD*, written with sagacity in two parts; *BOOK I: BAITING THE HANGMAN* and *BOOK II: IN THE HANGMAN'S SHADOW*, is his debut novel. The writer won several awards for his plays and productions, notably Special Mention, Poetry and Drama, under the 2001 ZIMBABWE BOOK PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION WRITING AND PUBLISHING AWARDS and the 2004 Best Play and Production Award under the ZIMBABWE INVITATIONAL ONE-ACT FESTIVAL hosted by Campbell Theatre. Kadoma is Basil Diki's hometown, but the writer now lives in Harare with his three children and entrepreneurial wife, Joleen. Despite being a boundless writer, demonology and comparative religious studies remain his pastime.



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**WHEN AN EX-COMMANDO,
 A MAN SEEKING CELEBRITY
 STATUS, PREPARES TO ROB THE
 LOUVRE MUSEUM OF THE MONA
 LISA, HIS 'WIFE' DISCOVERS THAT
 SHE IS HIS MISTRESS. IN THE
 EYE OF A CYCLONE, HER SON
 AND SHE BASE THEIR LIVES ON
 HOPE.**

**WITH A BUSINESS PROPOSAL
 IS ANOTHER MURDERER
 PROPHESED AS 'A DEMON IN
 HUMAN FORM'. AT THE VATICAN,
 HE ONCE ASPIRED TO BE THE
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 HAPPINESS HE FOUND AFTER
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 ABOVE HIS LIMITATIONS OR HE
 RISKS TOTAL RUIN.**

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